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FEAR

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Illustrations by: Cartier, R. Isip and Kramer

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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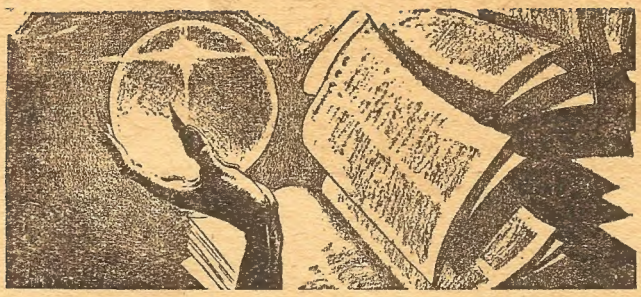

OF THINGS BEYOND

THIS month's department should properly, we think, be divided into three sections. First, to the Old Regulars:

Unknown appears in its new dress this month. We heartily welcome comments, purring gently under praise and yet willingly considering even the most sharp-cornered of bricks flung our way. Unknown is an experimental magazine—is, has been, always will be, if it is to serve its purpose—and we feel the change is a definite and worth-while step. You who have read it in the past know the work we've done and what we're trying to do. (No editor ever does what he wants to. If he finds a good author he tries to bring all others to the same high level, inevitably—in the process—discovering a better author. Therefore he's never able to reach his goal. The Greeks didn't have a publishing business, so the best they could invent was Tantalus.)

But the alteration of Unknown's dress means no alteration of policy. We hope it will be an avenue to better and more interesting authors.

To the New Discoverers: For somewhat over a year, Street & Smith have been exploring, through the medium of Unknown, the possibilities inherent in a completely untrammeled literary medium. Pure fantasy, wherein only the essential lows of human reaction and entertainment value serve to limit the author, should develop a far freer form of entertainment. Our philosophy is that "Ghoulies and ghosties and queer-legged beasties and things that go boomp i' the night"—in the words of the old English prayer—may be improbable, but they make good reading! And, furthermore,

until somebody satisfactorily explains away the unquestionable masses of evidence showing that people *do* have visions of things yet to come, or of things then occurring at far-distant points—until someone explains how it may be that Nostradamus, the prophet, predicted things centuries before they happened with such minute detail (as to names of people not to be born for half a dozen generations or so!) that no vague "Oh, vague generalities—things are always happening that can be twisted to fit!" can possibly explain them away—until the time those are docketed and labeled and neatly filed—

They belong to The Unknown. And they make good reading. And they add that primitive spice of a crawling spine that only the very safe and very civilized man can enjoy. He is safe behind the strong barriers of knowledge and defended by the deadly superstition exploders mounted on those walls.

But there still leaks over and through those boundaries strange signs of things very, very ancient that were strong and deadly when Man was young, and the jungle about him already hoary with an unguessed, oppressive age!

So—welcome to you. Read Unknown—laugh a bit at The Unknown. And of course there are no "things that go boomp i' the night."

But its very strange men have thought so for twenty thousand years.

And finally, for all readers:

Next month—since we have, we hope, given you a bit of chilling to ward off a summer night's heat with this month's "Fear"—we present something very logical. By two masters of logic gone cross-eyed—L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt. "The Mathematics of Magic" shows the results to be attained by a sound scientist, working with a knowledge of mathematics, logic, and the scientific method, stranded in a world where magic works. It takes the scientific method to make a real enchanter. The local yokels have some good tricks, but a pair of scientists at work analyzing magic into a system of law and order—with a highly elastic decimal point!—can really stir up something. Harold Shea, errant psychologist with an escape mechanism, really gets results in the world of Spenser's "Faerie Queene"!

All now present are invited to attend the gathering of the Wizards of the Slippery Decimal Point.

THE EDITOR.

No one ever noticed Bill,—until.....

YOU'VE GOT TO INVITE BILL SMITH TO YOUR PARTY.. JIM BROUGHT HIM OVER. LAST NIGHT AND HE PLAYS THE PIANO MARVELOUSLY
BILL SMITH? I NEVER KNEW HE PLAYED... HE'S ALWAYS SO QUIET I'VE HARDLY NOTICED HIM... I WONDER HOW HE LEARNED

LET MUSIC MAKE YOU POPULAR

it's easy to learn this "short cut" way

ONLY a few short months ago Bill was a back number socially. Then suddenly, Bill amazed all his friends. Almost overnight it seemed, he became the most popular man in his crowd.

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As the party got under way, Dot's face flushed.

"I'm sorry, folks, but Dave Gordon, our pianist, couldn't come. Isn't there someone here who can play?"

For a moment no one answered. Then suddenly Bill rose and strode to the piano. "Do you mind if I fill in?" he said. Everyone burst out laughing. But Bill pretended not to hear.

As he struck the first few chords, everyone leaned forward spellbound. For Bill was playing as Dave Gordon had never played, playing with the fire and soul of an inspired musician. In a moment Bill was the center of an admiring throng. In answer to their eager questions, he told them how he had always wanted to play, but never had the time or the money to realize his ambition. And then one day he read about the wonderful U. S. School of Music course, and how almost anyone could learn, at home, without a teacher, and at a fraction of the cost of ordinary old-fashioned methods. "That day," said Bill, "was a lucky day for me. I sent for the course, and when it arrived, I was amazed! The course was as much fun as a game, and in a few short months I had mastered some of the most popular pieces. There's no mystery about it. Learning to play is actually as easy as A B C, this 'Short-Cut' way."

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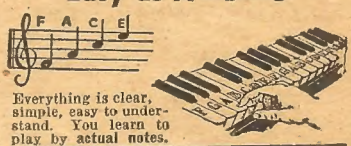

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A psychological fantasy

by L. RON HUBBARD

● Four hours—and a hat—were missing from his life. If he didn't find them—he'd go mad. And if he did—he'd die!

Author's Note: There is one thing which I wish the reader could keep in mind throughout, and that is: this story is wholly logical, for all that will appear to the contrary. It is not a very nice story, nor should it be read alone at midnight—for it is true that any man might have the following happen to him. Even you, today, might lose four hours from your life and follow, then, in the course of James Lowry. —*L. Ron Hubbard.*

LURKING, that lovely spring day, in the office of Dr. Chalmers, Atworthy College Medical Clinic, there might have been two small spirits of the air, pressed back into the dark shadow behind the door, avoiding as far as possible the warm sunlight which fell gently upon the rug.

Professor Lowry, buttoning his shirt said, "So I am good for another year, am I?"

"For another thirty-eight years," smiled Dr. Chalmers. "A fellow with a rugged build like yours

doesn't have to worry much about a thing like malaria. Not even the best variety of bug Yucatan could offer. You'll have a few chills, of course, but nothing to worry about. By the way, when are you going back to Mexico?"

"If I go when my wife gives me leave, that'll be never."

"And if I had a woman as lovely as your wife Mary," said Chalmers, "Yucatan could go give its malaria to somebody else. Oh, well"—and he tried to make himself believe he was not, after all, envious of Atworthy's wandering ethnologist—"I never could see what you fellows saw in strange lands and places."

"Facts," said Lowry.

"Yes, I suppose. Facts about primitive sacrifice and demons and devils— Say, by the way, that was a very nice article you had in the *Newspaper Weekly* last Sunday."

The door moved slightly, though it might have been caused by the cool breath of verdure which came in the window.

"Demons and devils, my brother? Who talks about us in these ignorant times?"

"When you have been here longer, my sister, you will find that a college can be expected to talk about anything."

"Thank you," said Lowry, trying not to look too pleased.

"Of course," said young Chalmers, "you were rather sticking out your neck. You had your friend Tommy frothing about such insolence. He's very fond of his demons and devils, you know."

"He likes to pose," said Lowry. "But how do you mean, 'sticking out my neck'?"

"Who is this Tommy, my brother?"

"Professor Lowry's best friend. Now hush."

"You haven't been here much under Jebson," said Chalmers. "He nearly crucified a young mathematician for using Atworthy's name in a scientific magazine. But then, maybe our beloved president didn't see it. Can't imagine the old stuffed shirt reading the *Newspaper Weekly*, anyway."

"Oh," said Lowry. "I thought you meant about my denying the existence of such things. Tommy—"

"WELL, maybe I meant that, too," said Chalmers. "I guess we're all superstitious savages at heart. And when you come out in bold-face type and ridicule ancient belief that demons caused sickness and woe and when you throw dirt, so to speak, in the faces of luck and fate, you must be very, very sure of yourself."

"Demons? Devils? Dirt in the faces of luck and fate? My brother, tell me about that man Lowry."

"In a moment. Now hush."

"Why shouldn't I be sure of myself?" said Lowry, smiling. "Did anyone ever meet a spirit of any sort face to face? I mean, of course, that there aren't any authenticated cases on record anywhere."

"Not even," said Chalmers, "the visions of saints?"

"Anyone who starves himself long enough can see visions."

"Still," said Chalmers, "when you offer so wildly to present your head in a basket to the man who can show you a sure-enough demon—"

"Did he write that?"

"Hush, sister."

"And my head in a basket he shall have," said Lowry. "For a man of science, you talk very weirdly, old fellow."

"I have been in a psychiatric ward often enough," said Chalmers. "At first I used to think it was the patient and then, after a while, I be-

gan to wonder. You know, demons are supposed to come out with the full moon. Ever watch a whole psychopathic ward go stark raving mad during the three days that a moon is full?"

"Nonsense."

"Perhaps."

"That doctor, my brother, is a man who sees too much."

"Let him see. Who would believe?"

"Chalmers, I tried, in that article, to show how people began to believe in supernatural agencies and how scientific explanation has at last superseded vague terror. Now don't come along and tell me that you can cast some doubt on those findings."

"Does the fellow believe nothing at all, my brother?"

"Oh"—and Chalmers began to laugh—"we both know that 'truth' is an abstract quantity that probably doesn't exist. Go crusading against your devils and your demons, Professor Lowry. And if they get mad at you, argue them out of existence. I myself don't say they exist. It merely strikes me strangely that man's lot could be so consistently unhappy without something somewhere aiding in that misery. And if it is because electrons vibrate at certain speeds, or if it is because the spirits of air and earth and water are jealous of any comfort and happiness that man might have, I neither know nor care. But how comforting it is to knock on wood when one has made a brag."

"And so," said Lowry, slipping into his topcoat, "the goblins are gonna get me if I don't watch out."

"They'll get you all right if Jebson saw that article," said Chalmers.

"Listen, my sister. You know where to find a Superior One. Go bring him to me swiftly."

"You are amused, my brother."

"And will be more amused very soon."

"Where will you be, my brother?"

"Following Professor Lowry. Make haste, my sister. I have been bored today."

"Have you any plan?"

"As yet, nothing sufficiently horrible. But make haste, my sister. I must catch up with him."

The door moved ever so little—but then, perhaps it was just the cool, sweet breath of spring whispering through the window.

LOWRY, swinging his stick, went out into the sunlight. It felt good to be home. The place looked and smelled good, too. For beyond the change of the seasons, there was never any difference in this town, never any real difference in the students; and when the college built a new building, why, it always looked somehow old and mellow before it was half completed. There was a sleepy sameness to the place which was soothing to one whose eyes had been so long tortured by the searing glare of spinning sun on brassy sand.

As he walked along toward his office he asked himself why he ever left this place at all. These great elms, putting forth their buds, yawning students stretched out upon the fresh green of grass, colorful jackets, a mild blue sky, ancient stone and budding ivy—

For the briefest flicker he half recalled the birth of his own wanderlust. A theft in his dorm, accusation, expulsion and disgrace; and three years later—three years too late to completely remove the scar—they had finally reached him to tell him that the guilty one had been found within a week after his running away. Remembering, he again felt that seep of shame through him

and the shy idea that he should apologize to the first one he met.

But it passed. It passed and the air was full of spring and hope and the smell of moist earth. Clouds, hard driven high up, occasionally flashed shadows over the pavement and lawns; the breeze close to earth frisked with the remnants of autumn, chasing leaves out of corners and across lawns and against trees, bidding them vanish and make way for a new harvest later on.

No, little ever changed in this quiet and contented mecca of education. Twenty-five years ago Franklin Lowry, his father, strolled down this same street; twenty-five years before that Ezekiel Lowry had done so. And each had done so not once but on almost every day of his mature life and then, dead, had been carried in a hearse along this way. Only James Lowry had varied such a tradition and that only slightly, but then James Lowry, in his quiet but often stubborn way, had varied many traditions. He had been the first Lowry to even start to stain that scholastic name, and he was certainly the first Lowry with the wanderlust. But then he had been a strange child; not difficult, but strange none the less.

Reared up in a great tomb of a house where no word was less than three syllables long and where the main attention paid to him was, "Hush!" James Lowry had, perforce, built a universe of his own from the delicate stuff of dreams. If he cared to look in that old dean of a mansion, he knew he could find his boyhood companions tucked out of sight below the planks which covered the attic floor with indifference: Swift, Tennyson, Carroll, Verne, Dumas, Gibbon, Colonel Ingram, Shakespeare, Homer, Kuyam and the unknown creators of myth and legend of all lands had been his advisers and companions and playmates, taking him off among discards and dust and whispering strange thoughts to him, a wide-eyed child, smear-faced with jam and attic cobwebs. But, he supposed, walking down in the warmth of the new sun, he, too, would keep on walking down this street, past these stores with pennants in the windows, past these students in bright jackets, past these old elms and ancient walls; and he, too, would probably be carried in a hearse over this pavement to a resting place beside his letter-burdened forefathers.

He was fortunate, he told himself. He had a lovely lady for a wife; he had an honest and wise gentleman for a friend; he had a respected position and some small reputation as an ethnologist. What of a slight touch of malaria? That would pass. What if men did not understand so long as they were respectful and even kind? Life was good and worth the living. What more could one ask?

A group of students passed him and two, athletes from the bars on their sweater arms, touched their caps and called him "sir." A professor's wife, followed at a respectful distance by her bundle-laden maid, nodded to him with a friendly smile. A girl from the library followed him with her glance a little way and without knowing it he walked the straighter. Indeed life was good.

"Professor Lowry, sir." It was an anæmic book-delver, assistant to an assistant in some department.

"Yes?"

The young man was a little out of breath and he took a moment or two, standing there and wringing a wretched cap in his hands, the better to talk clearly. "Sir, Mr. Jebson saw you pass by and sent me

after you. He wants to see you, sir."

"Thank you," said Lowry, turning and retracing his steps until he came to the curving pathway which led up to the offices. He did not wonder very greatly at being summoned for he was not particularly afraid of Jebson. Presidents had come and gone at Atworthy and some of them had had peculiar ideas; that Jebson was somewhat on the stuffy side was nothing to worry about.

THE GIRL in the outer office jumped up and opened the door for him with a muttered, "He will see you right now, sir," and Lowry went in.

Once or twice a new president had brought some furniture here and had even tried to change the appearance of this office. But the walls were older than paint and the floor had seen too many carpets pass away to shift itself much on the account of a new one. Dead men stared frostily out of frames. An eyeless bust of Cicero stood guard over a case of books which no one ever read. The chairs were so deep and so ancient that they might have been suspected of holding many a corpse that they had drowned.

Jebson was looking out of the window as though his inattention there might result in a collapse of the entire scene visible from it. He did not look around, but said, "Be seated, Lowry."

Lowry sat, regarding the president. The man was very thin and white and old, so stiff he looked more like plaster than flesh. And each passing year had dug a little deeper in the austere lines which furrowed his rather unkindly face. Jebson was motionless, for it was his pride that he had no nervous habits. Lowry waited.

Jebson, at last, opened a drawer and took out a newspaper which was partly printed in color; this he laid out before him with great care, moving his pen stand so that it would lie smoothly.

Lowry, until then, had felt peaceful. He had forgotten, completely and utterly, that article in the *Newspaper Weekly*. But even so he relaxed again, for certainly there was nothing wrong in that.

"Lowry," said Jebson, taking a sip of water which must have been white vinegar from the face he made, and then holding the glass before his face as he continued: "Lowry, we have stood a great deal from you."

Lowry sat straighter. He retreated to the far depths of himself and regarded Jebson from out the great shadows of his eyes.

"You have been needed here," said Jebson, "and yet you chose to wander in some lost and irretrievable land, consorting with the ungodly and scratching for knicknacks like a dog looking for a bone he has buried and forgotten." Jebson was a little astonished at his own fluent flight of simile and paused. But he went on in a moment. "Atworthy has financed you when Atworthy should not have financed anything but new buildings. Atworthy was not built on nonsense."

"I have found more than enough to pay for my own expeditions," ventured Lowry. "Those money grants were refunded three years ago—"

"No mind. We are here to develop the intelligence and youth of a great nation, not to exhume the moldering bones of a heathen civilization. I am no ethnologist. I have little sympathy with ethnology. I can understand that a man might

utilize such play as a hobby, but, holding as I do that man is wholly a product of his own environment, I cannot see that a study of pagan customs can furnish any true light by which to understand mankind. Very well. You know my opinions in this matter. We teach ethnology and you are the chair in anthropology and ethnology. I have no quarrel with learning of any kind, but I do quarrel with a fixation!"

"I am sorry," said Lowry.

"And I am sorry," said Jebson in the tone a master inquisitor of the Inquisition might have used condemning a prisoner to an auto-da-fé. "I refer, of course, to this article. By what leave, may I ask, was it written?"

"Why," floundered poor Lowry, "I had no idea that I was doing wrong. I seemed to me that the function of the scholar is to give his learning to those who might use it—"

"THE FUNCTION of the scholar has nothing to do with this, Lowry. Nothing whatever to do with this! Why, this wretched rag is a brand! It is trash and humbug! It is stuffed with lies under the name of scientific fact and has done more harm for the cause of truth than Fascism itself! And," he stated, ominously lowering his tone, "this morning I was confronted with the name of Atworthy in such a place! If a student had not brought it to me I might never have seen it at all. There it is, 'By Professor James Lowry, Ethnologist, Atworthy College.'"

"I saw no reason to sign anything else—"

"You had no right to inscribe it originally, 'Professor Lowry of Atworthy College.' It is cheap. It is a wretched attempt at notoriety. It demeans the very name and purpose of education. But then," he added with a sniff, "I suppose one cannot expect anything else from a man whose whole life has been highly irregular."

"I beg your pardon?" said Lowry.

"Oh, I have been here long enough to know the record of every man on our staffs. I know you were expelled—"

"That matter was all cleared!" cried Lowry, blushing scarlet and twisted with the pain of the memory.

"Perhaps. Perhaps. But that is beside the point. This article is cheap and idiotic and by being cheap and idiotic it has demeaned the name of Atworthy." Jebson bent over it and adjusted his glasses upon the thin bridge of his nose. "'Mankind's mental ills might in part be due to the phantoms of the witch doctors of yesterday!' Humph! 'By Professor James Lowry, Ethnologist, Atworthy College.' You will be writing about demonology next as something which one and all should believe! This is disgraceful. The entire town will be talking about it—"

Lowry had managed to control his shaking hands and now erased the quiver from his throat which sought to block his voice. "That is not an article about demonology, sir. It is an attempt to show people that their superstitions and many of their fears grew out of yesterday's erroneous beliefs. I have sought to show that demons and devils were invented to allow some cunning member of the tribe to gain control of his fellows by the process of inventing something for them to fear and then offering to act as interpreter—"

"I have read it," said Jebson. "I have read it and I can see more in it than you would like me to see. Prating of demons and devils and the placating of gods of fear— By

your very inference, sir, I suddenly conceive you to mean religion itself! Next, I suppose, you will attack Christianity as an invention to overthrow the Roman capitalistic state!"

"But—" began Lowry and then, turning red again, held his tongue and retreated even further into himself.

"This wild beration of demons and devils," said Jebson, "reads like a protest of your own mind against a belief which association with the ungodly and unwashed of far lands might have instilled in you yourself. You have made yourself ludicrous. You have brought mockery upon Atworthy. I am afraid I cannot readily forgive this, Lowry. In view of circumstances, I can find no saving excuse for you except that you desired money and gained it at the expense of the honor and esteem in which this institution is held. There are just two months left of this school year. We cannot dispense with you until the year is done. But after that," said Jebson, crumpling up the paper and tossing it into the wastebasket, "I am afraid you will have to look for other employment."

Lowry started up. "But, Jebson was—"

"With a better record, I might have forgiven. But your record has never been good, Lowry. Go back to the forgotten parts of the world, Lowry, and resume your commune with the ungodly. Good day."

Lowry walked out, not even seeing the girl who opened the doors for him; he forgot to replace his hat until he was on the walk; he had wandered several blocks before he came to himself. Dully he wondered if he had a class and then recalled that it was Saturday and that he had no Saturday classes. Vaguely he remembered having been on his way to attend a meeting or to have luncheon—no, it could not be luncheon, for it was evidently about two, according to the sun. And then the nudge of thought itself was swallowed in the wave of recollection.

He was shivering and it brought him around to thinking about himself for a moment. He mustn't shiver just because this world, for him, had come to an abrupt end; there were other colleges which might be glad to have him; there were millionaires who had offered to finance him, seeing that his traveling returned the investment and more. No, he should not feel so badly. And yet he shivered as though stripped naked to a winter's blast.

The racing clouds above darkened the street for whole seconds at a time; but there was something dead now in the sound of last year's leaves getting chased out of corners and there was something ugly in the nakedness of these elms. He strove to locate the source of his chill.

It was Mary.

Poor Mary. She loved this world of teas and respect; she had been brought up in this town and all her memories and friendships were here. It was enough that he would be talked about. It was too much that she leave everything that was life to her. Her friends would shake their heads barely in her sight.

No, she wouldn't want to stay here, where everyone would speculate on why he was ousted, where everyone would have no more reason to ask her to teas.

And the big scholarly mansion—she loved that old place.

He failed to understand Jebson, for he was too generous to be able to run the gamut of Jebson's thought process, starting with a little man's desire to injure a big one, and envy for Lowry's rather romantic and

mysterious aspect, passing through indirect insult to the college, and, finally, coming to light as a challenge to Christianity itself in some weird and half-understood way. Lowry was left floundering with only one fact on which to work: this was the culmination of a disgrace for which he had suffered acutely and innocently nearly twenty-one years before. And that pain and this pain were all entangled in his mind and driven hard home with the ache which was all through him, an ache he had forgotten was malaria.

Poor Mary.

Poor, beautiful, sweet Mary.

He had always wanted to appear grand to her, to make up somehow for being so many years older than she. And now he had brought her disgrace and separation from that which she knew best. She would take it well; she would follow him; she would be sorry and never once mention that she felt badly on her own account. Yes. Yes, she would do that, he knew. And he would not be able to prevent, nor even be able to tell her how badly he felt for her.

Again he had the recollection of having an appointment somewhere, but again he could not remember. The wind was chill now and tugged at his hat, and the clouds which swept their shadows over the pavement were darker still.

"Here is the Superior One, my brother. Have you begun?"

"Just begun, my sister. Welcome, sir."

"You have plans, little one? Have you set the problem?"

"Ai, sir. If you will enter that house just ahead and—"

He looked about him and found that he was within sight of an old house with iron deer before it, the home of Professor Tommy Williams, who, for all his bachelorhood, maintained his family place alone.

Feeling strangely as though all had not yet happened to him and experiencing the need of shelter and company, he walked swiftly to the place and turned up the walk. The mansion seemed to repel him as he stared at it, for the two gable windows were uncommonly like a pince-nez sitting upon the nose of a moldering judge; for an instant he hesitated, almost turned around and went away.

And then he had a mental image of Tommy, the one man in this world to whom he could talk, having been the one kid with whom he had associated as a boy. But if he had come out of his boyhood with a shy reticence, Tommy had chosen another lane, for Tommy Williams was the joy of his students and the campus; he had traveled much in the old countries and therefore brought to this place an air of the cosmopolitan, a gay disregard for convention and frumpy thought. Tommy Williams loved to dabble with the exotic and fringe the forbidden, to drink special teas with weird foreign names and read cabalistic books; he told fortunes out of crystal balls at the charity affairs and loved to eye his client afterward with a sly, sideways look as though outwarly this must all be in fun, but inwardly—inwardly, mightn't it be true? Tommy was all laughter, froth and lightness, with London styles and Parisian wit, a man too clever to have any enemies—or very many friends.

No. He need not pause here on the threshold of Tommy's home. It would do him good to talk to Tommy. Tommy would cheer him and tell him that old Jebson was, at his finest, a pompous old ass. He

mounted the steps and let the knocker drop.

Some dead leaves on the porch were going around in a harassed dance, making a dry and crackly music of their own; and then inanely they sped out across the lawn as though trying to catch up with a cloud shadow and so save themselves from an eventual bonfire. Nervous leaves, running away from inevitable decay, unable to cope with the rival buds which were pushing tenderly forth all unknowing that those things which fled had once been bright and green, coyly flirting with the wind. This was Lowry's thought and he did not like it, for it made him feel ancient and decayed, abandoned in favor of the fresh and green that he had no flaws, who were too young to be anything but innocent; how many days would it be before another had his job? Some youthful other, preaching, perhaps, from Lowry's own books?

He dropped the knocker again, more anxious than before to be admitted to the warmths of fire and friendship; his teeth were beginning to chatter and he had a sick, all-gone sensation where his stomach should have been. Malaria?—he asked himself. Yes, he had just come from Chalmers, who had called these chills malaria. He had not two hours ago peered into a microscope where his basically stained blood was spread out so that they could see the little globes inside some of the red corpuscles. Malaria wasn't dangerous, merely uncomfortable. Yes, this must be a malarial chill and shortly it would pass.

Again he dropped the knocker and felt the sound go booming through the high-ceilinged rooms within; he wanted to go away from there again, but he would not bring himself to leave just as Tommy came to the door. He shivered and turned up his collar. Very soon he would begin to burn; not unlike a leaf, he told himself. He peered through the side windows which flanked the door.

He had once more the idea that he had an engagement somewhere and pondered for an instant, trying to pull forth the reluctant fact from a stubborn recess.

No, he wouldn't keep standing here. Houses were never locked in this town, and Tommy, even if he was not home, would welcome him eagerly when he did return; he pushed open the door and closed it behind him.

It was dim in the hall; dim with collected years and forgotten events, with crêpe long crumbled and bridal bouquets withered to dust and smoky with childish shouts and the coughing of old men. Somewhere there was a scurrying sound as though a scholarly rat had been annoyed at his gnawing upon some learned tome. To the right the double doors opened portentously upon the living room, and Lowry, sensing a fire there, approached, hat in hand.

He was astonished.

Tommy Williams lay upon the sofa, one arm dangling, one foot higher than the other and both feet higher than his head; his shirt was open and he wore neither tie nor coat. For an instant Lowry thought he must be dead.

And then Tommy yawned and started a stretch; but in the middle of the action he sensed his visitor and came groggily to his feet, blinking and massaging his eyes and looking again

"Heavens, man," said Tommy, "you gave me a start for a moment. I was sound asleep."

"I'm sorry," said Lowry, feeling unnecessary. "I thought you were

gone and that I might wait until you—"

"Of course!" said Tommy. "I've slept too long anyway. What time is it?"

Lowry glanced at the great hall clock. "Five minutes after two."

"Well! That shows you what all play and no sleep will do to a fellow. Here, give me your hat and get warm by the fire. Lord, I've never seen a man look quite so blue. Is it as cold as that out?"

"I seem to be a little cold," said Lowry. "Malaria, I guess." He felt a little better—Tommy seemed so glad to see him—and he moved across the room to where two logs smoldered upon the grate. Tommy came by him and stirred them into a cheerful glow and then busied himself by the liquor cabinet, putting a drink together.

"You've got to take better care of yourself, old fellow," said Tommy. "We've only one Professor Lowry at Atworthy and we can't run the risk of losing him. Here, take this and you'll feel better."

Lowry took the drink in his hand, but he did not immediately partake of it; he was looking around the room at the old glass-fronted cases and the china figures on the stand in the corner. When he had been little he and Tommy had never been allowed to come into this place except when there was company and they were to be presented; and then, scour-faced and feeling guilty of some crime, they had been allowed to sit stiffly in a stiffer chair and gradually relapse into suffering stupidity.

How different was that Tommy from this one! Still, there was the same winning grin, the same shining head of black hair, always slight awry in an artistically careless way, the same classic face, startlingly pale against the blackness of the hair, the same graceful slenderness and the quick dancer movements with which he had always done things. Tommy, thought Lowry with a sudden clarity, was pretty; maybe that was what Lowry saw in him, something which complemented his own blunt ruggedness. Lowry sipped at the drink and felt the warmth of it spread pleasingly out to meet the glow from the brightly snapping flames.

Tommy was sitting on the edge of the sofa now; he always sat as though expecting to arise in another instant. He was lighting a cigarette, but he stared so long at Lowry that the match burned his fingers and he dropped it and placed the tips in his mouth. Presently he forgot about the sting and succeeded in applying the fire.

"Something is wrong, Jim."

Lowry looked at him and drank again. "It's Jebson. He found an article of mine in the *Newspaper Weekly* and he's raving mad about it."

"He'll recover," said Tommy with a rather loud laugh.

"He'll recover," said Lowry, "but just now I'm wondering if I will."

"What's this?"

"I'm being ousted at the end of the term."

"Why . . . why, the old fool! Jim, he can't mean that. It will take an order from the board—"

"He controls the board and he can do that. I've got to find another job."

"Jim! You've got to straighten this thing out. Jebson has never liked you, true, and he has muttered a great deal about you behind your back; you are too blunt, Jim. But he can't let you go this way. Why, everyone will be furious!"

THEY DISCUSSED the matter for a little while and then, at last, a sort of hopelessness began to enter their tones and their sentences became desultory to finally drop into a silence marked only by the occasional pop of the wood.

Tommy walked around the room with a restive grace, pausing by the whatnot stand to pick up a china elephant; tossing the fragile beast with a quick, nervous motion, he turned back to Lowry; there was a queer, strained grin on Tommy's lips but bleakness in his eyes.

"It would seem," said Tommy, "that your article has begun to catch up with you."

"That is rather obvious."

"No, no. Don't ever accuse me of being obvious, Jim. I meant the article was about demons and devils and tended to mock them as having any power—"

"Tommy," said Lowry with one of his occasional smiles, "they should put you to teaching demonology. You almost believe in it."

"When creeds fail, one must turn somewhere," said Tommy jokingly —or was it jokingly? "You say that the gods of luck are false; you wrote that it is silly to seek the aid of gods beyond the aid of the one supreme God; you said that demons and devils were the manufacture of Machiavellian witch doctors and that men could only be herded by the fear of those things they could not see; you said that men thought they found a truly good world to be an evil world in their blindness and so built a hideous structure of phantoms to people their nightmares."

"And what if I did?" said Lowry. "It is true. The world is not evil; the air and water and earth are not peopled with jealous beings anxious to undermine the happiness of man."

Tommy put the elephant back and perched himself on the edge of the couch; he was visibly agitated and kept his eyes down, pretending to inspect his immaculate nails. "No man *knows*, Jim."

Lowry rumbled out a short laugh and said, "Tell me now that you are so studied in those things that you actually credit a possibility of their existence."

"Jim, the world to you has always been a good place; that's a sort of mechanical reaction by which you like to forget all the ghastly things the world has done to you. You should be more like me, Jim. I *know* the world is an evil, capricious place and that men are basically bad and so, knowing that, I am always pleased to find some atom of goodness and only bored to see something evil. You, on the other hand, march forward relentlessly into sorrow and disappointment; to you all things are good, and when you find something which is mean and black and slimy you are revolted—and you've come to me today shivering as with the ague, racked by a treacherous turn done you by a man you should initially have thought good. That view of yours, Jim, will never bring you anything but misery and tears. Phantoms or not, that man is the safest who knows that all is really evil and that the air and earth and water are peopled by fantastic demons and devils who lurk to grin at and increase the sad state of man."

"And so," said Lowry, "I am to bow low to superstition and reinherit all the gloomy thoughts of my benighted ancestors. Devil take your devils, Tommy Williams, for I'll have nothing of them."

"But it would appear," said Tommy in a quiet, even, ominous way, "that they will have something of you."

"How can you arrive at that?"

"It would appear," said Tommy, "that the devils and demons have won their first round."

"Bah," said Lowry, but a chill coursed through him.

"You say they do not exist, in an article in the *Newspaper Weekly*. That same article arouses the rage of a vindictive fool and thereby causes your scheduled dismissal from Atworthy."

"Nonsense," said Lowry, but less briskly.

"Be nice and say the world is an evil place, filled with evil spirits. Be nice and forget your knightly manner. And now be nice and go home and fill yourself with quinine and rest."

"And I came to you," said Lowry with a smile, "for solace."

"To solace is to lie," said Tommy. "I gave you something better than that."

"Devils and demons?"

"Wisdom."

Lowry walked slowly into the hall, the chill making it difficult for him to speak clearly. Confound it, he was certain that he had an appointment somewhere this afternoon. He could almost recall the time as a quarter to three and the old clock was chiming that now. He reached toward the rack where his hat lay in a thick mass of coats and canes.

"Now, little one?"

"Now!"

II.

IT WAS dusk, at the twilight's end; all along the street windows were lighted and people could be seen through some of them, people with talk and food in their mouths; the wind had picked up along the earth and brought a great gout of white scurrying out of the dark—a newspaper. High above, a cool moon looked out now and then through rifts of anxiously fleeing clouds, and now and again a star blinked briefly beyond the torn masses of blue and black and silver.

Where was he?

The street sign said Elm and Locust Avenues, which meant that he was only half a block from Tommy's house and about a block from his own. He looked worriedly at his watch by the sphere of yellow in the middle of the street and found that it was a quarter to seven.

A quarter to seven!

The chill took him and his teeth castaneted briefly until he made his jaw relax. He felt for his hat, but it was gone; he felt panicky about the loss of his hat and cast anxiously about to see if it lay anywhere near.

A group of students strolled by, a girl flattered by the teasing of the three boys about her; one of them nodded respectfully to Lowry.

A quarter to three.

A quarter to seven.

Four hours!

Where had he been?

Tommy's. That was it. Tommy's. But he had left there at a quarter to three. And it was now a quarter to seven.

Four hours!

He had never been really drunk in his whole life, but he knew that when one drank indiscreetly there usually followed a thick head and a raw stomach; and as nearly as he could remember he had had only that one drink at Tommy's. And certainly one drink was not enough to blank his mind.

It was horrible, having lost four hours; but just why it was horrible he could not understand.

Where had he gone?

Had he seen anyone?

Would somebody come up to him on the morrow and say, "That was

a fine talk you gave the club, Professor Lowry"?

It wasn't malaria. Malaria in its original state might knock a man out, but even in delirium a man knew where he was, and he certainly had no symptoms of having been delirious. No, he hadn't been drunk and it wasn't malaria.

He began to walk rapidly toward his home. He had a gnawing ache inside him which he could not define, and he carried along that miserable sensation of near-memory which goes with words which refuse to come but halfway into consciousness; if he only tried a little harder he would know where he had been.

The night was ominous to him and it was all that he could do to keep his pace sane; every tree and bush was a lurking shape which might at any moment materialize into—into— In the name of God, what was wrong with him? Could it be that he was afraid of the dark?

Eagerly he turned into his own walk. For all that he could see, the ancient mansion slept, holding deep shadows close to it like its memories of a lost youth.

He halted for a moment at the foot of the steps, wondering a little that he saw no light in the front of the house; but then perhaps Mary had grown alarmed at his failure to come home and had gone to his office—no, she would have phoned. A clamoring alarm began to go within him.

Abruptly a shriek stabbed from the blackness:

"Jim! Oh, my God! Jim!"

He vaulted the steps and nearly broke down the door as he entered; for a moment he paused, irresolute, in the hall, casting madly about him, straining to catch the sound of Mary's voice again.

There was nothing but silence and memory in this house.

He leaped up the wide stairway to the second floor, throwing on lights with hungry fingers as he went. He glanced into all the rooms on the second floor without result and sprang up the narrow débris-strewn stairs to the attic. It was dismal here and the wind was moaning about the old tower and trunks crouched like black beasts in the gloom; he lighted a match and the old familiar shapes leaped up to reassure him. She was not here!

Tremblingly he made his way down, to again examine the rooms of the second floor. He was beginning to feel sick at his stomach and his blood was two sledge hammers knocking out his temples from within. He had lighted everything as he had come up, and the light itself seemed harsh to him, harsh and unkindly in that it revealed an empty house.

Could she have gone next door?

Was there a dinner somewhere that she had had to attend without him? Yes, that must be it. A note somewhere, probably beside his chair, telling him to hurry and dress and stop disgracing them.

On the first floor again he searched avidly for the note, beside his chair, on the dining-room table, in the kitchen, on his study desk, on the mantelpiece—. No, there wasn't any note.

He sank down on the couch in his study and cupped his face in his hands; he tried to order himself and stop quivering; he tried to fight down the nausea which was, he knew, all terror. Why was he allowing himself to become so upset? She must not have gone very far, and if she had not left a note, why then she intended to be back shortly.

There was an entity of some sort up there, purring gently and softly prying his fingers loose from their grip on the cliff—

Nothing could happen to anyone in this lazy, monotonous town.

Her absence made him feel acutely what life would mean without her. He had been a beast, leaving her and running away to far lands, leaving her to this lonely old place and the questionable kindness of faculty friends. Life without her would be an endless succession of purposeless days lived with a heavy hopelessness.

For minutes he sat there, trying to calm himself, trying to tell himself that there was nothing wrong, and after a little he did succeed in inducing a state of mind which, if not comfortable, at least allowed him to stop shivering.

THE OUTER DOOR slammed and quick footsetps sounded in the hall. Lowry leaped up and ran to the door.

She was hanging up her new fur wrap.

"Mary!"

She looked at him in surprise, so much had he put into the word.

"There you are, Jim Lowry! You vagabond! Where were you all this time?"

But he wasn't listening to her; his arms were almost crushing her and he was laughing with happiness. She laughed with him, even though he was completely ruining the set of her hair and crumpling the snowy collar of her dress.

"You're beautiful," said Lowry. "You're lovely and wonderful and grand and if I didn't have you I would walk right out and step over a cliff."

"You better not."

"You're the only woman in the world. You're sweet and loyal and good!"

Mary's face was glowing and her eyes, when she pushed him back a little to look up at him, were gentle.

"You're an old bear, Jim. Now account for yourself. Where have you been?"

"Why—" and he stopped, feeling very uneasy. "I don't know, Mary."

"Let me smell your breath."

"I wasn't drunk."

"But you're shivering. Jim! Have you gotten malaria again? And here you are walking around when you should be in bed—"

"No. I'm all right. Really, I'm all right, Mary. Where were you?"

"Out looking for you."

"I'm sorry I worried you."

She shrugged. "Worry me a little now and then and I'll know how much I worship you. But here we are gabbing and you haven't had anything to eat. I'll get you something immediately."

"No! I'll get it. Look. You just sit down there by the fire and I'll light it and—"

"Nonsense."

"You do as I tell you. You sit there where I can look at you and be your most beautiful and I'll rustle up my chow. Now don't argue with me."

She smiled as he forced her down into the chair and giggled at him when he dropped the sticks he had picked up from the basket. "Clumsy old bear."

He got the fire going and then, putting out his hand as a protest against her moving, he sped through the dining room and into the kitchen, where he hurriedly threw together a sandwich from yesterday's roast beef and poured himself a glass of milk. He was so frightened that she would be gone before he could get back that he resisted all impulse to make coffee.

PRESENTLY he was again in the living room, sighing in relief that she was still there. He sat down on the

lounge opposite from her and held the sandwich in front of his face for a full minute, just looking at her.

"Go on and eat," said Mary. "I'm no good at all to let you sup on cold food."

"No, no! I won't have you do a thing. Just sit there and be beautiful." He ate slowly, relaxing little by little until he was half sprawled on the lounge. And then a thought brought him upright again. "When I came in here I heard screams."

"Screams?"

"Certainly. You sounded like you were calling to me."

"Must be the Allison radio. Those kids can find the most awful programs and they haven't the least idea of tuning them down. The whole family must be deaf."

"Yes, I guess you are right. But it gave me an awful scare." He relaxed again and just looked at her.

She had very provocative eyes, dark and languorous, so that when she gave him a slow look he could feel little tingles of pleasure go through him. What a fool he was to go away from her? She was so young and so lovely— He wondered what she had ever seen in an old fool like himself. Of course, there were only about ten years between them and he had lived outdoors so much that he didn't look so very much over thirty-one or thirty-two. Still, when he sat like this, studying her sweet face and the delicate rondures of her body and seeing the play of firelight in her dark hair and feeling the caress of her eyes, he could not wholly understand why she had ever begun to love him at all; Mary, who could have had her choice from fifty men, who had even been courted by Tommy Williams— What did she see in a burly, clumsy, granite-being like himself? For a moment he was panicky at the thought that some day she might grow tired of his silences, his usual lack of demonstrativeness, his long absences—

"Mary—"

"Yes, Jim?"

"Mary, do you love me a little bit?"

"A lot more than a little bit, Jim Lowry."

"Mary—"

"Yes?"

"Tommy once asked you to marry him, didn't he?"

A slight displeasure crossed her face. "Any man that could carry on an affair with a student and still ask me to marry him— Jim, don't be jealous again; I thought we had put all that away long ago."

"But you married me instead."

"You're strong and powerful and everything a woman wants in a man, Jim. Women find beauty in men only when they find strength; there's something wrong with a woman, Jim, when she falls in love with a fellow because he is pretty."

"Thank you, Mary."

"And now, Mr. Lowry, I think you had better get yourself to bed before you fall asleep on that couch."

"Just a little longer."

"No!" She got up and pulled him to his feet. "You're half on fire and half frozen, and when you get these hangovers the best thing for you is bed. I couldn't ever see what pleasure a man could get out of wandering off to some land just so he could roast in the sun and let a bug bite him. To bed with you, Mr. Lowry."

He let her force him up the stairs and into his room and then he gave her a long kiss and a hug sufficient to break her ribs before he let her return to the living room.

He felt very comfortable inside as he undressed and was almost on the verge of singing something as he

hung up his suit when he noticed a large tear on the collar. He inspected it more closely. Yes, there were other tears and the cloth was all wrinkled and stiff in spots as if from mud. Why, good grief! The suit was ruined! He puzzled over it and then, in disgust for having destroyed good English tweeds, he crammed jacket and trousers into the bottom of a clothes hamper.

As he got into his pajamas he mused over what a lovely person Mary really was. She hadn't called his attention to it and yet he must have looked a perfect wreck.

He washed his hands and face in an absent sort of way, musing over how he could have wrecked his suit. He dried himself upon a large bath towel and was about to slip on his pajama coat when he was shocked to see something which looked like a brand upon his forearm.

It was not very large and there was no pain in it; interested, he held his arm closer to the light. The thing was scarlet! A scarlet mark not unlike a tattoo. And what a strange shape it had, like the footpads of a small dog; one, two, three, four—four little pads, as though a small animal had walked there. But there were few dogs that small. More like a rabbit—

"Strange," he told himself.

He went into his room and turned out the light. "Strange." He eased in between the covers and plumped up his pillow. A mark like the footprint of a rabbit. How could he have torn his suit and stained it with mud? What could have put this stamp upon his arm? A chill came over him and he found it difficult to stop his jaw muscles from contracting.

THE COOL MOON, blanked out for seconds by the racing clouds, laid a window pattern across the foot of his bed. He flung the covers back, annoyed that he had forgotten to open the window, and raised the sash. An icy belt was thrown about him by the wind and he threw himself hurriedly back between the covers.

Well, tomorrow was quite another day, and when the sun came he would feel better; still, malaria had never given him this sick feeling in his stomach.

The cool moon's light was blue and the wind found a crack under the door and began to moan a dismal dirge; the sound was not constant, but built slowly from a whisper into a round groan and then into a shriek, finally dying again into a sigh. And lying there Jim Lowry thought there was a voice in it; he twisted about and attempted to cover up his right ear, burrowing his left in the pillow.

The wind was whimpering and every few seconds it would weep, "Where?" And then it would mutter out and grumble and come up again as though tiptoeing to his bedside to cry, "Why?"

Jim Lowry turned over and again pulled the covers down tight against his ear.

"Where?"

A whimpering complaint.

"Why?"

The window rattled furiously as though something was trying to get in; with tingling skin, Lowry came up on his elbow and stared at the pattern of light. But the cool moon's light was only marred by the speeding clouds. Again the window was beaten and again there was only moonlight.

"I'm a fool," said Lowry, pulling up the covers again.

A sigh.

"Why?"

"A whimpering complaint.

"Where?"

The curtain began to beat against the glass and Lowry flung out to raise it all the way so that it could not move. But the string and disk kept striking against the pane and he had to locate a pin so that he could secure them.

"I'm a fool," said Lowry.

He had listened to drums off somewhere in the black. He had slid into dark caverns to feel tarantulas and snakes running over or striking his boots; he had once awakened with a moccasin slithering out from under his top blanket; he had mocked at curses; he had once taken a cane knife away from an infuriated and drunken native—

A sigh.

"Why?"

A whimpering complaint.

"Where?"

Fear's sadistic fingers reached in and found his heart and aped its regular rhythm to send his blood coursing in his throat. Just the moan of the wind under a door and the protest of the curtains and the rattle of the sash and the moon's cold blue light upon the bottom of his bed—

The door opened slowly and the curtains streamed straight out as the wind leaped into the room from the window. The door banged and the wall shivered. And a white shape was moving slowly toward him on soundless feet and a white face gleamed dully above a glittering knife. Nearer and nearer—

. . . . . .

Lowry sprang savagely at it and knocked the knife away.

But it was Mary.

Mary stood there, looking at him in hurt amazement, her hand empty but still upheld. "Jim!"

He was shaking with horror at the thought he might have hurt her; weakly he sank upon the edge of the bed, and yet there was relief in him, too. A broken glass lay upon the rug when she turned on the light and a white pool of warm milk steamed in the cold air. She held her hand behind her and, with sudden suspicion, he dragged it forth. He had struck the glass so hard that it had cut her.

He pulled her small hand to the light and anxiously extracted a broken fragment from the cut and then applied his lips to it to make it bleed more freely. He opened a drawer and took out his expedition first-aid kit and found some antiseptic and bandages. She seemed to be far more anxious about him than about her hand.

"Mary."

"Yes?"

He pulled her down to the edge of the bed and threw part of the spread about her shoulders.

"Mary, something awful has happened to me. I didn't tell you. There are two things I didn't tell you. Jebson found that *Newspaper Weekly* article and at the end of this term I am going to be dismissed. We . . . we'll have to leave Atworthy."

"Is that all, Jim? You know that I don't care about this place; anywhere you go, I'll go." She was almost laughing. "I guess you'll have to drag me along, no matter how deep the jungles are, Jim."

"Yes. You can go with me, Mary. I was a fool never to have allowed it before. You must have been terribly lonely here."

"I am always lonely without you, Jim."

He kissed her and felt that this must be the way a priest might feel touching the foot of his goddess.

"And the other thing, Jim?"

"I . . . I don't know, Mary. I have no idea where I was between a quarter of three and a quarter of seven. Four hours gone out of my life. I wasn't drunk. I wasn't delirious. Four hours, Mary."

"Maybe you fell and struck something."

"But there is no bruise."

"Maybe you don't know all there is to know about malaria."

"If it blanks out a mind, then it is so serious that the patient isn't going to feel as well as I do now. No, Mary. It . . . it was something else. Tommy and I were talking about demons and devils and . . . and he said that maybe I should not have attacked them in that article. He said they might be trying . . . well— The world *is* a good place, Mary. It isn't filled with evil things. Man has no reason to walk in the shadow of dread because of phantoms."

"Of course he hasn't, Jim. Tomorrow you may find out what happened. It might be something perfectly innocent."

"You think so, Mary?"

"Certainly. Now you lie down there and get some sleep."

"But—"

"Yes, Jim?"

"I feel . . . well . . . I feel as though something horrible had happened to me and that . . . that something even more horrible is going to happen soon. I don't know what it is. If I could only find out!"

"Lie down and sleep, Jim."

"No. No, I can't sleep. I am going out and walk and maybe the exercise will clear my head and I'll remember—"

"But you are ill!"

"I can't lie here any longer. I can't stay still!"

He put down the window and began to dress. She watched him resignedly as he slipped into a jacket.

"You won't be gone very long?"

"Only half an hour or so. I feel I must walk or explode. But don't disturb yourself on my account. Go to sleep."

"It's nearly midnight."

"I feel—" He stopped, beginning again with a different tone. "This afternoon I felt I had an appointment somewhere at a quarter to three. Maybe I went somewhere— No. I don't know where I went or what I did. No. I don't know! Mary."

"Yes, Jim."

"You're all right?"

"Of course I'm all right."

He buttoned up his topcoat and bent over and kissed her. "I'll be back in half an hour. I feel I . . . well, I've just got to walk, that's all. Good night."

"Good night, Jim."

III.

THE NIGHT was clean and clear and, as he poised for a moment on top of the steps, the smell of fresh earth and growing things came to him and reawakened his memories. It was the kind of night that makes a child want to run and run forever out across the field, to feel the earth fly from beneath his feet, driven by the incomprehensible joy of just being alive. On such a night he and Tommy had once visited a cave a mile out of town which was supposed to be haunted and had succeeded in frightening themselves out of their wits by beholding a white shape which had turned out to be an old and lonely horse. The memory of it revived Lowry: Tommy's fantastic imagination and his glib tongue!

And how Tommy loved to devil his slower and more practical friend;

that had just been devilment today. Witches and spooks and old wives' tales, devils and demons and black magic. How Tommy, who believed in nothing, liked to pretend to beliefs which would shock people! How he adored practically knocking his students out of their seats by leaning over his desk and saying, in a mysterious voice, "To be polite, we call this psychology, but, in reality, you know and I know that we are studying the black goblins and fiendish ghouls which lie in pretended slumber just out of sight of our conscious minds." How he loved such simile! Of course, what he said was true, absolutely true, but Tommy had to choose that way of putting it; it was such a dull world, so drab; why not enliven it a little and stick pins into people's imaginations? Indeed, dear Tommy, why not?

The top of his head was cold and he reached up to discover that he had forgotten his hat, and, discovering that, remembered that he had lost it. Because his gear was mainly tropical he had only one felt hat, and one did not walk around Atworthy in a solar topi; not Atworthy! The loss of it troubled him. And his best tweed ruined beyond repair! But then his hat had his name in the band, being a good hat, and some student would find it where the wind had taken it and return it to the dean's office— Still, there was something wrong in that; there was a deeper significance to having lost his hat, something actually symbolic of his lost four hours. Part of him was gone; four hours had been snatched ruthlessly from his life and with them had gone a felt hat. It struck him that if he could find the hat he could also find the four hours. Strange indeed that anything should so perplex him, the man whom little had perplexed.

Four hours gone.

His hat gone.

He had the uneasy feeling that he ought to walk along the street toward Tommy's and see if the hat was there under a bush; it seemed a shame to leave a good hat on some lawn; it might rain.

Yes, most certainly, he had better find that hat.

He started down the steps to the walk, glancing up at the hurrying fleece between earth and the moon. He had been down these steps thousands of times; when he reached the "bottom" he almost broke his leg on an *extra step*.

He stared at his feet and hastily backed up, swiftly to discover that he could *not* retreat. He almost fell over backward into space! There were no steps above him, only a descent of them below him. Glassy-eyed he looked down the flight, trying to take in such a length of steps. Now and then they faded a little as they went through a dark mist, but there was no clue whatever of what might lie waiting at the bottom.

He looked anxiously overhead and was relieved to find that the moon was still there; he was standing so that his eyes were above the level of the yard and he felt that he could reach over to the indefinite rim and somehow pull himself out. He reached, but the rim jerked away from him and he almost fell. Breathless he stared down the flight to mystery. The moon, the steps, and no connection between himself and the porch.

Somewhere he thought he heard a tinkle of laughter and glared about, but it was evidently nothing more than a set of Japanese wind chimes on the porch. Somehow he knew that he dared not reach the bottom, that he had not sanity enough to

face the awful thing which waited there. But then, all he had to do was descend two more steps and he would be able to reach up to the rim and haul himself forth. He descended; the rim retreated. That was no way to go about it, he told himself, glancing at his empty hands. He would back up—

Again he almost went over backward into a void! The two steps he had descended had vanished away from his very heels.

THERE WAS that laughter again—no, just the sweet chording of the wind chimes.

He peered down the angle of the flight, through the strata of dark mist, into a well of ink. Wait. Yes, there was a door down there, on the side of the flight, not thirty steps below him. That door must lead out and up again; the very least he could do would be to chance it. He went down, pausing once and glancing over his shoulder. How odd that these steps should cease to exist as soon as he passed along them! For there was now nothing but a void between himself and the front of his house; he could still see the lights shining up there. What would Mary think—

"Jim! Jim, you forgot your hat!"

He whirled and stared up. There was Mary on the porch, staring down into the cavity which had been a walk.

"Jim!" She had seen the hole now.

"I'm down here, Mary. Don't come down. I'll be up in a moment. It's all right."

The moonlight was too dim for him to see the expression on her face poor thing, she was probably scared to death.

"Jim! Oh, my God! Jim!"

Wasn't his voice reaching her? "I'm all right, Mary! I'll be back as soon as I reach this door!" Poor kid.

She was starting down the steps, and he cupped his hands to shout a warning at her. She could do nothing more than step out into space! "Stop, Mary! *Stop!*"

There was a peal of thunder and the earth rolled together over his head, vanishing the moonlight, throwing the whole flight into complete blackness.

He stood there trembling, gripping the rough, earthy wall.

From far, far off he heard the cry, dwindling into nothing, "Jim! Oh, my God! Jim!" Then it came again as the merest whisper. And finally once more, as soundless as a memory.

She was all right, he told himself with fury. She was all right. The hole had closed before she had come down to it, and now the trap up there was thickening and making it impossible for her voice to get through. But he felt, somehow, that it was all wrong. That she wasn't up there now. He began to quiver and feel sick, and his head spun until he was certain that he would pitch forward and go tumbling forever into the mystery which reached up from the bottom—the bottom he dared not approach.

Well, there was a door ahead of him. He couldn't stand here whimpering like a kid and expect to get out of this place. He'd seen the door and he'd find it. He groped down, feeling for each step with a cautious foot and discovering that their spacing was not even, some of them dropping a yard and others only an inch. The wall, too, had changed character under his hands, for now it was slimy and cold, as though water had seeped down from above for ages, wearing the stone

smooth and glossing it with moss. Somewhere water was dripping slowly, one drop at a time, frighteningly loud in the corpse-quietness of this place.

He'd been in worse, he told himself. But it was funny, living in that house all those years without ever suspecting the existence of such a flight at the very bottom of his front steps.

What was he doing here, anyhow? He'd told himself that he had to find something—

Four hours in his life.

A felt hat.

Where the devil was that door? He had come thirty steps and his questing hands had yet to find it. Maybe he could back up now, but when he tried that he found that the steps had kept on vanishing as he went over them. If he had passed the door he could never get back to it now! A panic shook him for a moment. Maybe the door had been on the other side of the stairs! Maybe he had gone by it altogether! Maybe he would have to go down—all the way down to— To what?

SOMETHING sticky and warm drifted by his cheek and he recognized it as probably being a stratum of mist; but what strange mist it was! Warm and fibrous, and even vibrant, as though it was alive! He strung several strands of it with his hands, and then, as though he had caught a snake, it wriggled and was gone.

He rubbed his palms against his coat, trying to rid them of the tingling feeling. He stepped lower, and now the mist was clinging to him like cobwebs, sticking to his cheeks and tangling about his shoulders.

Somewhere he heard a faint call. "Jim! Jim Lowry!"

He tried to surge toward it, but the mist held him with invisible, sticky fingers.

"Jim Lowry!"

What an empty voice!

With all his strength he tore at the mist, expecting it to string out and tear away; but instead, it was like being released all at once, and he nearly fell down the steps he could not see. Again he sought the wall and felt his way along, now and again hopeful that the steps above had not vanished, but finding always that they had. There must be a door somewhere!

The shock of light blinded him.

He was standing on what seemed to be solid earth, but there was no sun—only light, blinding and harsh. Seared earth, all red and raw, stretched away for a little distance on every side; great gashes had been washed out of gratey stone.

A small boy sat unconcernedly upon a small rock and dug his initials out of the stony earth. He was whistling a nonsensical air, badly off key, with *whooshes* now and then creeping out with his whistle. He pulled his straw hat sideways and glanced at Lowry.

"Hello."

"Hello," said Lowry.

"You ain't got any hat on," said the boy.

"No. So I haven't."

"And your hands are dirty," said the boy, returning to his aimless task.

"What's your name?" said Lowry.

"What's yours?" said the boy.

"Mine's Jim."

"That's funny. Mine's Jim, too. Only it's really James, you know. Looking for something?"

"Well—yes. My hat."

"I saw a hat."

"Did you? Where?"

Solemnly the boy said, "On my father's head." He gave vent to a

wild peal of laughter at his joke. Then he reached into his pocket. "Want to see something?"

"Why, I suppose so. If it's worth seeing."

The boy took out a rabbit's foot and held it admiringly toward Lowry. Then there was just a rabbit's foot hanging there, and darkness reached in from the outskirts of the land and swallowed even that. Lowry took a step and again almost fell down the stairs. He inched his way along; water was dripping somewhere; the steps were more and more worn with age; from the moss on them it was doubtful if many had passed this way.

Below he saw a dull gleam which seemed to emanate from a side entrance. Well! There was a door down there, after all! Why hadn't he walked off into the harsh red land and so found his way back to the top again! But, never mind, here was a door ahead of him, and a door meant egress from these stairs. Thank God he did not have to go to the bottom!

Mist swirled briefly and the door was faded out, but in a moment it had again appeared, clearer than before except that it was now closed and the light came from an indefinable source on the stairs themselves. He was not particularly frightened now, for he was intent upon a certain thing: he knew that somewhere he would find his hat and the four hours. He felt he should have asked the boy.

WHEN he stood before the door he breathed heavily with relief. Once away from these steps he knew he would feel better. He tried the handle, but the portal was locked from within, and there was no sign of a knocker. He bent over to squint through the keyhole, but there was no keyhole. He straightened up and was not surprised to discover that a knocker had appeared before him; the thing was a verdigris-stained head of a woman out of whose head grew snakes, the Medusa. He dropped it, and the sound went bouncing from wall to wall down the steps as though a stone was falling. He waited a long while before he heard any sound from within, but just as he was about to raise the knocker again there came out a grating of rusty bars which were being removed and then the latch rattled and the door swung wide and the acrid smell of burning herbs and a thick, unclean cloud of darkness rolled from the place; two bats squeaked as they flew forth, hitting Lowry with a soft, skin wing. The smell of the place and the smoke got into his eyes so that he could not clearly see the woman; he had an impression of a wasted face and yellow teeth all broken and awry, of tangled, colorless hair and eyes like holes in a skull.

"Mother, I would like to leave these stairs," said Lowry.

"Mother? Oh, so you are polite tonight, James Lowry. So you'd like to flatter me into thinking you are really going to stand there and try to come in. Hah-hah! No, you don't, James Lowry."

"Wait, mother, I don't know how you know my name, for I have never been here before, but—"

"You've been on these stairs before. I never forget a face. But now you are coming down, and then you were going up, and your name was not James Lowry, and every time you went up another step you would kick away the one below, and when you came here you laughed at me and had me whipped and spat upon my face! I never forget!"

"That is not true!"

"It will do until there's something that *is* true in this place. And now I suppose you want your hat."

"Yes. Yes, that's it. My hat. But how did you know that I was looking—"

"How do I know anything? Hah-hah. He's lost his hat. It went like a bat. Now what do you think of that? He's lost his hat! Well, now, James Lowry, that's a very silly thing to do, to do, to do. To lose your hat. You are old enough to know better, and your head is big enough to keep a hat on. But that isn't all you've lost, James Lowry."

"Why—no, it isn't."

"You've lost four hours, just like that! Four whole hours and your hat. Want advice?"

"If you please, mother, can't we come in off these *stairs?*"

"You can't leave them. You walked up them, and now you'll walk down them all the way to the bottom. You must do it, that's all there is to it. You can sag and drag and gag and wag, but you've got to go to the bottom. All the way down. All the way down. All the way, way, way, way, way, way, way down! *Down! Down! Down!* Want some advice?"

"If you please."

"Then give me your pocket handkerchief."

He gave it to her, and she violently blew her nose upon it and threw it out into the darkness. In a moment one of the bats came back, bringing it. She threw it away and the other bat came back.

"Runaways!" she scolded them. "Want some advice, James Lowry?"

"Please, mother."

"Don't try to find your hat."

"Why not, mother?"

"*Because if you find your hat you'll find your four hours, and if you find your four hours then you will die!*"

LOWRY BLINKED at her as she stuffed the pocket handkerchief into his coat and reached out, talon-fingered, toward his throat. But though he felt the bite of her nails, she was only straightening his tie.

"Want advice, James Lowry?"

"Yes, mother."

"Hats are hats and cats are cats, and when the birds sing there is something awry in the world. Bats are bats and hats are hats, and when it is spring the world is only bracing itself for another death. Rats are rats and hats are hats, and if you can't walk faster then you'll never be a master. You have a kind face, James Lowry. Want some advice?"

"Yes, mother."

"Go on down the stairs and you'll meet a man. If you are bound to die, then ask him where you lost your hat."

"He'll tell me?"

"Maybe he will and maybe he won't. Bats are hats are rats are cats are hats and there is no soup deep enough to drown."

"Drown what, mother?"

"Why, to drown, that's all! You have a kind face, James Lowry."

"Thank you, mother."

"And then you'll meet another man after you meet the first man. But they aren't men, either of them. They're ideas. And the first man will tell you that you are about to meet the second man, and then the second man will tell you that you have to go on down to the foot of the stairs. All the way to the bottom. Down, down, down—"

"Where is the bottom, mother?"

"At the top, of course. Hats lead to bats, lead to cats, lead to rats.

Rats are hungry, James Lowry. Rats will eat you, James Lowry. Hats, you came here to bats, you go on to cats, you get eaten by the rats. Do you still want to find your hat?"

"Please, mother."

"Oh, what a contrary, stubborn, bullheaded, witless, rotten, thoughtless, bestial, wicked, heartless, contrary, stubborn, bullheaded, witless, rotten— Do you still want to find your hat, James Lowry?"

"Yes, mother."

"You don't believe in demons and devils?"

"No, mother."

"You *still* don't believe in demons or devils?"

"No, mother."

"Then look behind you, James Lowry."

He whirled.

But there was only darkness.

THERE WAS the sound of a slamming door. Far away a voice cried, "Jim! Jim Lowry!"

When he felt of the place where the door had been, for it was inky dark once more, he could find nothing but the wall. He groped upward, but the steps were gone. He groped downward and the voice, clearer now, was calling, "Jim! Jim Lowry!"

Step by step, sometimes an inch and sometimes a yard, sometimes slanting to the right, sometimes level and sometimes to the left, but always the opposite direction from what they first appeared. Another stratum of mist, white this time, curling smokily about him; it was full of something that stung his throat, but something, too, which made him walk with less fear and a straighter back.

"Jim! Jim Lowry!"

It was quite close now; it sounded hollow, as though it was being brayed by a town crier into an echo-box. There wasn't much interest in it any more than there is interest in the voice of a train caller bidding the commuters to pack into the 5:15.

"Oh, Jim! Jim Lowry!"

Paging Mr. Lowry. Paging Mr. Lowry.

The white mist was clearing as he came down into its lower levels, and he could see the stairs now. They had changed; they were clean and dry and made of polished marble, and they had an elaborately carved railing which, after the stone, was very soothing to his touch. It seemed that this case was winding a little, and that just below there was a great hall hung in banners with half a hundred guests about a board —but he did not feel that he should go near the guests. A big Great Dane came bounding up to him and almost knocked him down, and then, as though it had made a mistake, gave a sniff and walked, stiff-legged, away. Lowry kept on going down the steps.

"Jim! Jim Lowry!"

He was on a landing stage, and something had happened to the guests in the great hall, though he knew they were quite near. To his right hung a gold-and-white tapestry depicting combat in the lists, and to his left stood a stand full of lances, above which hung a sword plaque and a shield with three rampant lions upon it.

A HAND tapped him on the shoulder and he snapped around to find a tall knight in full armor, made taller by the waving white plume of his visored helmet, the visor of which was down.

"James Lowry?"

"Yes?"

"Are you sure you are Jim Lowry?"

"Yes."

"Then why answer to the name of James? Never mind, we won't quibble. You know me?"

"I am sorry that I can't seem to place you. Your helmet visor is down, you know, and you are all cased in steel—"

"Well, well, old fellow, we won't equivocate about a visor now, will we? We are both gentlemen, and so there is no reason to quarrel, is there? Especially about a little thing like a visor. You think you are dreaming, don't you?"

"Why, no. I didn't exactly—"

"That's it. You are not dreaming. See, I'll pinch you." And he did, and nodded sagely when Lowry jerked away. "You are not dreaming, and this is all perfectly real. If you don't believe it yet, then look at the mark these steel fingers made."

Lowry glanced at the back of his hand and saw that it was bruised and bleeding.

"Now about this hat," said the knight. "You're bound to find it?"

"Certainly."

"It was only worth a few dollars, you know. And believe me, old man, what are a few dollars compared to the value of your own life?"

"What does my life have to do with a hat?"

"Oh, now I say, old fellow, didn't you hear the old mother tell you that if you found the hat you found the four hours, and that if you found the four hours you lost your life? Now let's look at this thing sagely, eh? Let's examine it in the light of cold and dispassionate reasoning. A hat is worth perhaps ten dollars. During the remaining thirty-five years of your life you will probably make a hundred and fifty thousand dollars at, say forty-five hundred dollars a year. Now is that anything to exchange for a ten-dollar bill?"

"Well-l-l—no-o-o."

"All right, old fellow, I am glad you see my point. Now let us probe more deeply into this problem. You are a very intelligent man. You have lost four hours. In the thirty-five years you may yet live there will be exactly three hundred and five thousand, four hundred and forty hours. Is that time sufficient to outweigh a perfectly stupid period like four hours?"

"No—but—"

"Ah, so we must still argue about this some more. You are bound to find your hat, eh?"

"I would like to."

"And you won't worry if you find your hat and then find the four hours—for they are right there side by side?"

"Well—"

"Now! I thought you'd weaken after a while. Find your hat, find four hours, find death. That's the way it will run. Hats are too numerous for you to go scrambling around looking for just one."

"I'll . . . I'll think it over."

"Don't do that. You should be convinced right here and now that it is no use finding that hat. And forget the four hours. Forget them quite completely."

"Maybe—" ventured Lowry, "maybe you can tell me what *did* happen in those four hours."

"Oh, now, come, old fellow! I tell you that if you find out you will surely die, and you ask me point-blank to tell you. And here I am trying to *save* you, not destroy you."

"You can't even give me a hint?"

"Why should I?"

"Was it that article—"

"Tut, tut, Jim Lowry. Don't try to worm it out of me, for I have no reason to wish you dead. In fact, I think you are a swell fellow, a veritable prince and the best there is. Now you just go on down—"

"Was it malaria?"

"Tut, tut."

"Was it the drink?"

"Hush, now."

"Was it—"

"I said to be quiet!" roared the knight. "If you are so determined to learn, you go on down those steps and you'll come to a man. That's all I'll say. You'll come to a man."

"Thank you," said Lowry. "And now, would you mind telling me your name?"

"Name? Why should I have a name. I am a knight, and I am full of ideals."

"But if I see you again I won't recognize you."

"I said I am full of ideals!"

"Well, what difference does that make? I am full of ideals, too." He reached out and started to raise the fellow's visor. The knight did not jerk away, but stood quite still.

The visor went up.

The suit was empty!

And there was darkness.

After a little while Lowry made another attempt to go up, but again it was futile; he almost fell through the void above him. He stood still, shivering. Did—did he have to go *down there*, after all? Down to—Swiftly he shook off the wild craving to scream. He grew calm.

There was something a little different about these steps, he found; they gave out another sound, a hollow sound, as though they were built of lumber; and unlike the others which had been above, these were regular. After a very short descent he almost fell trying to reach a step which was seemingly solid earth. Yes. He was on a flat expanse of earth! He could see nothing—

Suddenly he turned and felt for the bottom step. It was still there. The one above it was still there. The one above that was still there. Maybe the stairs were all there once more! Perhaps he could again gain the top! But again he stumbled, for where there had been a landing of marble there was now a platform of wood with a railing about it and further ascent was impossible. He went down the steps again to the flat expanse of earth.

He had not seen the fellow before, mainly because the fellow was all dressed in black. All in black. He wore a black slouch hat with a wide brim which almost covered the whole of his face, but was unable to hide the grossness of the features or the cruelty of the mouth; his powerful but hunched shoulders were draped in a black cloak of ancient manufacture; his shoes had black buckles upon them. He was carrying a lantern which threw, at best, a feeble glow between himself and Lowry; this he set down and perched himself upon a wooden seat, taking something long and snaky from under his arm. He then took out a little black book and, lifting the lantern, peered intently at the pages.

"Lowry?"

"That is I."

"Huh! Frank fellow, aren't you? Well, everybody knows better than to shilly-shally with me." He spat loudly and looked back at the book. "Nice, black weather we're having, isn't it?"

"Yes. I suppose so."

"How much do you weigh, Lowry?"

"A hundred and ninety pounds."

"Hm-m-m. Hundred and ninety pounds." He found a pencil and

scribbled a note in his book. Then he lifted the lantern high and took a long look at Lowry's face and body. "Hm-m-m. No deformities?"

"I don't think so."

"Hundred and ninety pounds and an ordinary neck. James Lowry, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, we won't be knowing each other very long, but that's your trouble, not mine."

"What . . . what is your name?"

"Jack. It's really Jack Ketch, but you can call me Jack." He spat loudly again. "If you want to do right by me and make it easy, why just put a pound note or two in your pocket when you come up."

There was a certain odor of decay about the fellow—decay and dried blood—which made Lowry's neck hair mount. "Why a pound note?"

"Why not? I've got to eat same as you used to. I can make it pretty easy or I can make it terrible bad. Now if you want my advice, you'll just pass over a pound note or two now and we can get down to business. I hate this waiting around. It's all built there, and we'll only get mixed up more if we keep delaying things and you'll only worry about it. What do you say to that?"

"I . . . I don't know what you are talking about."

He raised the lantern and stared at Lowry. "Hm-m-m. And you look bright enough." He set the lantern back and took up the long, snaky thing from his lap. His coarse fingers became busy with it.

Lowry felt terror begin its slow seep through him. Jack Ketch. That was a familiar name. But he was certain he had never seen this man before. Jack Ketch—

Suddenly Lowry saw what the man was doing. That thing he had was a rope! And on it he was tying a hangman's noose!

And those steps. There were thirteen of them! And a platform at the top—a gallows!

"*No!*" screamed Lowry. "You can't do it! You have no reason to do it!"

"Hey! Hey, Lowry! Jim Lowry! Come back here! You can't run away from me! You'll never be able to run away from me! Lowry—Jim Lowry—"

The hangman's boots were thudding behind him, and the whip of the cloak was like thunder.

Lowry tried to catch himself on the brink of new steps, sensing rather than seeing them, but the steps were slippery and he could not stop. He braced himself for the shock of striking those immediately below—

But he struck nothing.

Tumbling, twisting, turning, down, down, down through an inky void with the horror of falling, a lump of agony in his stomach. Down, down, down, down, through mists and the slashing branches of trees and mists again.

And then Lowry was lying in ooze, with the feel of it squashy between his fingers and the smell of it dead and rotten. Somewhere something was moving in the blackness. Brush was crackling and something was breathing hard and hot, something searching.

As quietly as he could, Lowry crept away. It was too dark for anything to see him; if he could be silent—

"Lowry! Jim Lowry!"

Lowry pressed into the muck and lay still.

"So you don't think I can see you, Jim Lowry! Wait a moment. I have something for you."

Jack Ketch's voice was growing

closer, and Lowry knew that while he could not see a thing, he must be plainly visible to Jack Ketch. Madly he leaped to his feet and floundered away; brush stung him and the half-submerged trunk of a tree tripped him and, knee-deep, he somehow kept on.

"I can tell you where you can find your hat, Jim Lowry. I want to help you." And there was a sound of spitting. "You can't get away from me."

Lowry felt warm water up as high as his knees, with ooze beneath, and the steam of it smelled decayed. He hurried through it.

"I'm trying to help you, Jim Lowry!" said Jack Ketch, seemingly closer now. "All I want to do is help you. I can tell you where to find your hat. Won't you listen to me?"

Sick and weary, Lowry fell prone and pried himself out of the mud again and floundered on.

"I don't want to hurt you," pleaded Jack Ketch's voice. "I only want to hang you!" He swore and spat. "That's what a man gets for trying to help. Lowry! Come back here! I want to tell you where to find your hat!"

THE GROUND was hard under his feet now, and Lowry fled swiftly through the velvet dark. A mighty force abruptly smote him on the chest and knocked him flat and half drowned into a mauling suction of sand and sea, turning him swiftly and snatching at him and dragging him under and outward. He was drowning!

He opened his mouth to scream and choked upon the salt water; he was being held in the depths, and all around him was a greenish light, and he could see the silver bubbles of his own breath going up to the surface.

Suddenly he was on top, sucking breath into his tortured body, breath which was half sea water. He coughed and retched and tried to cry for help. And then the panic quieted in him and he found that he could stay afloat very easily. His breathing returned to normal as he tread water and he looked anxiously for Jack Ketch, but of the hangman there was no sign. Instead there was a long, jungle strand, a yellow beach bathed in white waves, green trees of gigantic size bending over the sea. And the sky was blue and the sea was blue and there was no sound in all this peaceful serenity. Lowry thankfully dragged in the beauty of the place and wondered at the comfortable warmth which spread through him. He eyed the beach again, but not for Jack Ketch; vaguely now he remembered that he had lost something—that he had lost four hours. Somehow he had to find them despite all the warnings which he had been given; somehow he had to rearrange his memory so that he would know for certain—

The darkness was settling once more and there came a wind, at first very low and then shrill, and the waves began to stir restlessly. He was beginning to feel tired.

Suddenly he knew that there was something in the deep below which was going to strike up and snatch him down, that there were many black and awful things beyond description which would haul him under and rend him apart.

He began to swim toward the shore through the thickening dark. It took all his wits to keep from speeding in blind panic and to keep from dwelling upon the things which must be under him. There was a roaring in the air and a thunder of

breaking surf, and, looking closely across the waves, he saw great towers of spume appearing and vanishing, water smashed to white frenzy on a jagged reef. He turned. He would be mashed beyond recognition if he tried to land here, and yet he knew that he could not stay long in this water, for at any moment now something would reach up and gnash him in half. But he could not turn back, for the sea seemed to be forcing him in upon the jagged black teeth which thrust up through the surf. Somewhere lightning battered blue sheets at the world. But there was no thunder beyond that of the surf. He was being raised ten feet and dropped ten feet by the surging waves, and each time he was closer to the rocks. He could not hear, he could not breathe. He was caught in a trap of water, and if he did not drown he would be smashed to a mangled mess.

Something bumped against him and he recoiled. It bumped against him a second time and he glanced toward it. A piece of wood! But even as he seized upon it he knew that it was of a peculiar design, and that he had no right to touch it.

Just above the piece of wood he sensed a presence. He looked up.

He saw a book, held by a pair of hands. That was all. Just a book and a pair of hands.

"Now hold on tight," said a somewhat oily voice. "Everything is going to be all right very soon. But you must hold on tight and close your eyes and not see anything and not hear anything but what I tell you to see and hear. Believe in me and do exactly as I tell you—"

The voice was getting faint and far away, but that was because Lowry's weary face had dropped into the soothing cushion of the water while his hands, almost nerveless, still held the piece of wood.

IV.

"COME on, now. You'll come around all right. A nice sleep in the jail will fix you up. Never did see why men had to drink— Why, it's Professor Lowry!"

The words came to him dimly, and the sensation of hands touching him at last reached his consciousness. He allowed himself to be helped from the wet pavement, feeling bruised and sore.

The rain was blowing under the street light in silver clouds which polished everything they touched; there was a damp, good smell in the night, a smell of growing and the rebirth of the soil.

Old Billy Watkins, his dark poncho streaming, was standing beside him, holding him up. Old Billy Watkins, who had been a young constable when Lowry was a kid and who had once arrested Lowry for riding a bicycle on the sidewalk and again on the complaint that Lowry had broken a window, and yet Old Billy Watkins could hold up Jim Lowry, Atworthy professor now, and be respectful if a little startled. The white mustache was damped into strings and was, for a change, washed quite clean of tobacco juice.

"I wonder," said Lowry in a thick voice, "how long I have been lying there."

"Well, now, I would put it at about five minutes or maybe six minutes. I come along here about that long ago and I got clear up to Chapel Street before I recollected that I'd forgot to put a call in at the box down here, and so I come back and here you was, lying on the sidewalk."

"Don't look for your hat," the hag whispered, "because if you do, you'll find it, and right beside it the four hours you lost. Then you'll die—"

"What time is it?"

"Well, I guess it's pretty close to four. Sun be up pretty soon. Is your wife sick? I see some lights on in your house."

"No. No, Billy, I guess I'm the one that's sick. I started out to take a walk—"

"Must've been unable to sleep. Now me, I find out a nice hot drink of milk is just about the thing to put a man to sleep. Are you feeling all right?"

"Yes. Yes, I guess I feel all right now."

"You must have stumbled and fell. You got a bruise on your face and you seem to have lost your hat."

"Yes . . . yes, I guess I lost my hat. I must have stumbled. What street is this?"

"Why, your street, of course. That's your house right there, not thirty feet behind you. Here, I'll help you up the steps. I heard tell you had one of them tropical diseases. Mrs. Chalmers' maid was saying it wasn't nothing bad, though. What you want to go running off into countries like that for with all them heathens, Jimmy—I mean, Professor Lowry?"

"Oh—I guess it's exciting."

"Yeah, I reckon it must be. Like my grandpap. Fighting Injuns all night and buildin' railroads all day. Now, there you are. Want me to ring the bell for you, or have you—"

"No, the door's open."

"Well, your missis took to lockin' it while you was gone and I thought maybe she still did. You look pretty pale, Ji—professor. You sure I better not call Doc Chalmers for you?"

"No, I'm all right."

"Well, by golly, you don't *look* all right. Well, maybe you know best. Good night."

"Good night, Billy."

With fascination he watched Old Billy Watkins go hobbling down the steps. But the walk was perfectly solid and Old Billy reached the street, turned back and waved and then went on up the avenue through the rain.

LOWRY OPENED the door and went in. Water formed a pool about his feet as he took off his coat.

"Is that you, Jim?"

"Yes, Mary."

She leaned over the upper railing and then, drawing her robe about her, came swiftly down. "I've been half out of my mind. I was just about to call Tommy and have him come over so that we could look for you— Why, you're soaking wet! And you've got a bruise on your face! And what's that on your hand?"

Lowry looked down at his hand; there was another bruise there and a cut as though he had been pinched. He winced. "I fell, I guess."

"But where? You smell like . . . like seaweed."

A chill gripped him and, all concern, she threw down his coat and, regardless of the carpet, pulled him up the stairs. It was very cold in the old house and colder still in his room. She got his clothes off him and rolled him in between the covers and then wiped his face and hair with a towel.

There was a taste of salt water on his lips and a string of words sounding in his brain: "Why, the bottom is at the top, of course!"

"I should never have let you go out."

"Poor Mary. I've worried you."

"I'm not thinking about that. You're liable to be very ill because of this. Why didn't you come back when it first began to rain?"

"Mary."

"Yes, Jim?"

"I love you."

She kissed him.

"You know I'd never hurt you, Mary."

"Of course not, Jim."

"I think you're good and loyal and beautiful, Mary."

"Hush. Go to sleep."

He closed his eyes, her hand soothing upon his forehead. In a little while he slept.

He awoke to the realization that there was something horribly wrong, as if something or someone was near at hand, ready to do a thing to him. He stared around the room, but there was nothing in it; the sun was shining pleasantly upon the carpet and part of the wall, and somewhere outside people were passing and talking, and a block or two away an impatient hand was heavy upon a horn button.

It was Sunday and he ought to be thinking about going to church. He threw back the covers and stepped out of bed. His clothes were hung upon a chair, but the suit he had worn was smudged and spotted and muddy and would have to be cleaned before he could wear it again.

"Mary!"

She must be sleeping. He pulled a robe about him and went to the door of her room. She was lying with one arm flung out across the covers, her mouth parted a little and her hair forming a luminous cloud about her lovely face. She stirred and opened her eyes.

"Oh!" she said, awake. "I've overslept and we're late for church. I'll have to get breakfast and—"

"No," said Lowry. "You aren't going to church."

"But, Jim—"

"You've earned a sleep. You just lie there and be lazy, for I'm certain you haven't been in bed more than three or four hours."

"Well—"

"I'll keep up the family honor—and I'll get something to eat at the diner. You turn over and sleep—"

"My beauty sleep."

"You don't need sleep to be beautiful." He kissed her and then, closing her door behind him, went into his room and took out a dark suit.

When he had bathed and dressed he tiptoed to her door again.

"Jim," she said sleepily, "there were some people coming over this afternoon. I wish you'd tell them that I don't feel well or something. I don't want to go hustling about straightening up the house."

"As you will, darling."

"Tell me what the women wore," she called after him.

He was feeling almost sunny himself when he walked down the porch steps. But on the last one he halted, afraid to step to the walk. It took him some time and the feeling that he was being observed by the passers-by to make him move. But the walk was perfectly solid this morning and, again with relief and near-sunniness, he strolled to the street, nodding to people as he passed them.

The diner was nearly deserted and the blue-jowled short-order cook was having himself a cigarette and a cup of coffee at the end of the counter. He scowled when he saw someone come in and then brightened upon discovering it was Lowry.

"Well, professor! Haven't seen you since you got back."

Lowry shook Mike's soft, moist hand. "I've been pretty busy, I guess. Make it ham and eggs and coffee, Mike. And speed it up, will you? I'm late for church."

"Bell hasn't started to ring yet," said Mike, and got busy with a frying pan, grandly cracking the eggs with one hand.

"How's it feel to be back among civilized people again?" asked Mike, putting the food down before Lowry.

"I suppose so," said Lowry, not listening.

Mike, a little mystified, went back to his cup of coffee and lighted another smoke to sit broodingly, cup and cigarette both poised for use but momentarily forgotten; Mike shook his head as he gave the problem up and drank his coffee.

Lowry ate slowly, mainly because his head was a tumult of thought: Tommy's words kept passing through his mind and he could not wholly shake away the bleak forefodings Tommy had uttered, for it was unlike Tommy to jest with a man who was already worried. He had felt a gulf opening between them even as he and Tommy had talked; it was odd to seem strange and ill at ease with Tommy Williams. Why, he had even confided in Tommy that it had been he who had broken the window that time when Billy Watkins had been unable to shake the alibi; and Tommy and he had once signed a boyish pledge in blood to be friends forever.

Lowry had almost finished when he found that the food did not taste good to him; a slow feeling of quiet fear was seeping through him. Of what, he wondered, could he be afraid? The place was suddenly suffocating and he hurriedly reached for change to pay. As he placed a fifty-cent piece on the counter he caught a glimpse of the mirror between the coffee urns. There was his own face, bleak and haggard and—

Through the mirror he saw that something was behind him! A blurry, awful something that was slowly creeping upon his back!

He snapped around.

There was nothing.

He faced the mirror.

There was nothing.

"Forty cents," said Mike.

"What?"

"What'sa matter? Are you sick or something? There wasn't nothin' wrong with them eggs, was there?"

"No," said Lowry. "No. There wasn't anything wrong with the eggs."

"You forgot your change!" Mike called after him.

But Lowry was already on the sidewalk, striding swiftly away, utilizing every faculty to keep from running, to keep from glancing over his shoulder, to fight down the frozen numbness which threatened to paralyze him.

"Hello, Jim."

He dodged and then, seeing that it was Tommy, felt a surge of elation. "Hello, Tommy."

"You look shaky, old man," said Tommy. "You'd better take better care of that malaria or the old bugs will carve you hollow."

"I'm all right," said Lowry, smiling. Tommy was evidently on his way to church for he was dressed in a dark suit and a dark topcoat. Tommy, thought Jim, was a remarkably good-looking guy.

"Did you take your pills on schedule?"

"Pills?"

"Quinine or whatever you are supposed to take."

"Well—no. But I'm all right. Listen, Tommy, I don't know when I've been so glad to see anybody."

Tommy grinned. "Glad to see you, Jim."

"We've been friends for a long time," said Lowry. "How long is it now?"

"Oh, about thirty-four years. Only don't say it. When one is as old as I am and still trying to act the

Beau Brummell, he doesn't like to have his age get around."

"You going to church?"

"Sure. And where else would I be going?"

"Well—" Lowry shrugged and, for some reason, chuckled.

"We've been meeting on that corner, now, at about this time, for a long while," said Tommy. "Where's Mary?"

"Oh, she didn't get much sleep last night and she's staying home today."

"I wish I had an excuse like that. Parson Bates is a baron among bores; I don't think he'd ever heard of the Old Testament until I mentioned it to him at one of his wife's endless teas."

"Tommy . . . Tommy, there's something I want to ask you."

"Fire away, old top."

"Tommy, when I left you yesterday afternoon, it was about a quarter of three, wasn't it?"

"Just about, I should imagine."

"And I did leave, didn't I?"

"Certainly, you left," replied Tommy, rather amused.

"And I only had one drink?"

"That's right. Say, this thing is really bothering you, isn't it? Don't try to hide anything from the old seer himself. What's up?"

"Tommy, I've lost four hours."

"Well! I've lost thirty-nine years."

"I mean it, Tommy. I've lost four hours and . . . and my hat."

Tommy laughed.

"It's not funny," said Lowry.

"Jim, when you look at me with those serious eyes of yours and tell me that you're half out of your mind over a hat—well, it's funny, that's all. No offense."

"I've lost four hours. I don't know what happened in them."

"Well—I suppose that would worry a fellow. But there are plenty of other hours and plenty of other hats. Forget it."

"I can't, Tommy. Ever since I lost those four hours, things have been happening to me. Terrible things." And very swiftly he sketched the events of the night just passed.

"Down the stairs," said Tommy, very sober now. "Yes. I get your point—and I get more than that."

"What's it all about?" pleaded Lowry.

TOMMY WALKED quite a way in silence and then, seeing that they were nearing the crowd before the old church, stopped. "Jim, you won't believe me."

"I'm about ready to believe anything."

"Remember what I told you yesterday? About your article?"

"You think my article has something to do with it?"

"Yes. I believe it has. Jim, you took a very definite and even insulting stand upon a subject which has been dead for a hundred years at the very least."

"Insulting? To whom?"

"To— Well, it's hard to say, Jim, in a way that you wouldn't decry the moment it was uttered. I wouldn't try to find your hat if I were you."

"But . . . but somehow I know that if I don't find it this thing will drive me mad!"

"Steady, now. Sometimes it's even better to be mad than dead. Listen, Jim, those things you said you met—well, those are very definitely representative of supernatural forces. Oh, I know you'll object. Nobody believes in supernatural forces these days. All right. But you have met some of them. Not, of course, the real ones that might search you out—"

"You mean devils and demons?"

"That's too specific."

"Then what do you mean?"

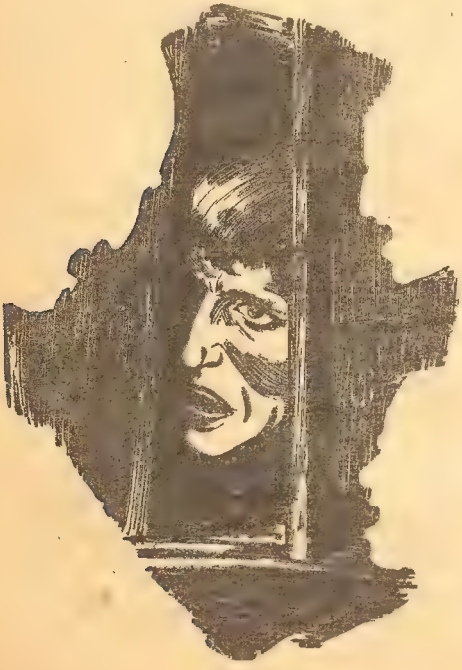
"First Jebson. Then four hours and a hat. By the way, Jim, have you any marks on your person that you didn't have when you were with me?"

"Yes." Jim pulled up his coat sleeve.

"Hm-m-m. That's very odd. That happens to be the footprint of a hare."

"Well?"

"Oh, now, let's forget this," said Tommy. "Look, Jim. Yesterday I was feeling a little bit blue and I talked crossly about your article. Certainly, it went against the grain, for I would like to believe in the actuality of such forces—they amuse me in a world where amusement is far between. And now I am feeding these ideas of yours. Jim, believe me, if I can help you I shall. But all I can do is hinder if I put ideas into your mind. What you are suffering from is some kind of malarial kick-back that doctors have not before noticed. It faded out your memory for a while and you wandered around and lost your hat. Now keep that firmly in mind. You lost your memory through malaria and you lost your hat while wandering. I'm your friend, and I'll throw everything overboard before I'll let it injure you. Do you understand me?"



"Thanks—Tommy."

"See Dr. Chalmers and have him fill you full of quinine. I'll stand by and keep an eye on you so that you won't wander off again. And I'll do that for another purpose, as well. If you see anything, then I'll see it, too. And maybe, from what I know of such things, I can keep any harm from befalling you."

"I hardly know what—"

"Don't say anything. As much as anything, I've been responsible for this with all my talk about demons and devils. I think too much of you, and I think too much of Mary to let anything happen. And —Jim."

"Yes?"

"Look, Jim. You don't think that I fed you a drug or anything in that drink?"

"No! I hadn't even thought of such a thing!"

"Well—I wondered. You know I'm your friend, don't you, Jim?"

"Yes. Of course I do. Otherwise I wouldn't run the risk of telling you these things."

Tommy walked on with him toward the church. The bell was tolling, a black shadow moving in the belfry, and the rolling circles of sound came down to surround the nicely dressed people on the steps and draw them gently in. Jim Lowry looked up at the friendly old

structure; the leaves had not yet come out upon the ivy, so that great brown ropes went straggling across the gray stone; the stained windows gleamed in the sunlight. But somehow he felt very much out of place here. Always it seemed to him that this was a sanctuary and a place of rest, but now—

A WOMAN nudged against him in the crowd and he came to himself enough to see that it was the wife of Dean Hawkins. He remembered.

"Oh, Mrs. Hawkins!"

"Why, how do you do, Professor Lowry. Isn't your wife with you today?"

"That is what I wanted to say, Mrs. Hawkins. She is not feeling very well, and I believe she told you that she would be expecting you for tea this afternoon."

"Why, yes."

"She asked if she could beg off, Mrs. Hawkins."

"Perhaps I had better call and make sure she doesn't need something."

"No. All she needs is a little rest."

"Well, do tell her that I hope she will soon be feeling better."

"Yes, I shall," said Lowry, and then lost touch with her in the aisle.

Tommy usually sat with Lowry and Mary, and, as usual, their section of the pew was reserved for them. Lowry slid into the seat and glanced around, nodding absently to those about who nodded to him.

"She's an awful old frump," said Tommy in a whisper. "No wonder Hawkins has dyspepsia. It's a wonder she'd speak to you after the news."

"What news?" whispered Lowry, barely turning toward Tommy.

"Why, about you and Jebson. She and Mrs. Jebson are pals, and it's all over the place now. It's doubtful if she'd have called on Mary, anyway. I'm ruining my social status sitting with you. It's very funny, the way they carry on. As if you even felt bad about a fool like Jebson."

"I do feel bad. A little."

"Why? You've gotten a release from the sink of ennui. You'll be free at last from teas. You don't know when you *are* fortunate."

"What about Mary?"

"Mary has been dying to travel with you, and now you can't say 'no.' If you weren't taking it so hard, she would probably be giggling like a kid. Think of telling Mrs. Hawkins not to call! Why, can't you see it, Jim? She kicked *the* Mrs. Hawkins straight in the teeth."

"We will sing," said a distant voice, "Hymn No. 197."

The organ began to wheeze and complain, and everyone got up and dropped books and shuffled and coughed; then the nasal voice of Parson Bates cut through the scrape and din, the choir lifted tremulous wails and the service was on.

Throughout the sermon, Lowry's eyes were centered upon the back of Jebson's head; not a particularly intent gaze, but one that was broken now and then by Jebson's twisting uncomfortably. However, Lowry was barely seeing Jebson at all, but, half lulled by Bates' dreary rhythm, was adrift out of himself, casting restively about in search of an an answer.

An answer.

He knew he had to have an answer.

He knew that if he did reach an answer—

Four hours gone. And now he dimly realized that if he did not find them he was doomed, as Tommy had indirectly said, to future madness. And yet he knew instinctively

and no matter how dimly, that he dared not find those four hours. No, he dared not. And yet he must!

He was on his feet again, staring blankly at the hymn book and singing more from memory than either the notes or the organ. And then he wasn't singing, but was oblivious of everything.

Some soft substance had touched against his leg.

He was afraid to look down.

He looked down.

There was nothing there.

Dry-throated and trying not to shiver, he focused his gaze upon the book and picked up the hymn. He glanced at Tommy, but Tommy was crooning along in his mellow baritone, unaware of anything at the moment but the glory of God.

The congregation was seated and a plate went the rounds while Bates read some announcements for the week. Lowry tried not to look at his feet and sought not to pull them up under the bench. He was growing more and more tense, until he did not see how he could sit there longer.

Something soft touched against his leg.

And though he had been looking straight at the spot—

There was nothing!

He clutched Tommy's sleeve, and with a muttered, "Come with me," got up and started up the aisle. He knew that eyes were upon him, he knew that he dared not run, he knew that Tommy was staring at him in astonishment, but was following dutifully.

THE SUN was warm upon the street, and the few fresh leaves made sibilant music in the gentle wind. A kid in rags was sitting on the curb tossing a dime up and down that somebody had given him for wiping off their shoes. The chauffeur drowsed over the wheel of Jebson's car, and up the street a sleepy groom held the horses of the eccentric Mrs. Lippincott, who always came in a surrey. The horses lazily swished their tails at the few flies and now and then stamped. The headstones of the cemetery looked mellow and kind above the quiet mounds of reborn grass, and an angel spread masonry wings over "Silas Jones, R. I. P." There was the smell of fresh earth from a lawn which was being sodded, and the spice of willows from a nearby stream.

Lowry's pace slowed under the influence of the day, for he felt better now out in the open, where he could see for some distance on every side. He decided not to tell Tommy, and Tommy was asking no questions.

But as they crossed the gleaming white pavement of High Street, something flickered in the corner of Lowry's eye. It was nothing very positive, just an impression of something dark and round traveling along beside him. He jerked his head to stare at it—but there was nothing there. He glanced up to see if it could have been the shadow of a bird but, aside from some sparrows foraging in the street, there were no birds. He felt the tension begin to grow in him again.

Again he caught the faintest glimpse of it, but once more it vanished under scrutiny. And yet, as soon as he turned his head front, he could sense it once more.

Just the merest blob of darkness, very small.

A third time he tried to see it, and a third time it was gone.

"Tommy."

"Yes?"

"Look. You're going to think I'm-

nuts. Something touched my leg in church and there wasn't anything there. Something is coming along beside me now. I can't see it clearly, and it vanishes when I look at it. What is it?"

"I don't see anything," said Tommy, muffling his alarm. "Probably just some sun in your eye."

"Yes," said Lowry. "Yes, that's it! Just some sun in my eye."

But the merest spot of shadow, so near as he could tell, or whatever it might be, followed slowly. He increased his stride, and it came, too. He slowed in an attempt to let the thing get ahead of him, so that he could find out what it was. But it also slowed.

He could feel the tension growing.

"You'd better not say anything about this to Mary."

"I won't," promised Tommy.

"I don't want to worry her. Last night I know I did. But you won't worry her with any of this, will you?"

"Of course not," said Tommy.

"You'd better stay over at our house tonight."

"If you think you'll need me."

"I . . . I don't know," said Lowry miserably.

They walked on, and Lowry kept edging away from the thing he could almost see, so that he almost made Tommy walk in the gutter. He was deadly afraid that it would touch him again, for he felt that if it did he would go half mad.

"Tommy."

"Yes."

"Will you walk on my right?"

"Sure."

And then Lowry could barely get an impression of it from out the corner of his left eye. His throat was choked as if with emery dust.

When they came to the walk before Lowry's house they paused.

"No word of this to Mary," said Lowry.

"Naturally not."

"You'll stay for dinner and for the night, won't you?"

"As you will," smiled Tommy.

They went up the steps and into the hall, and at the sound of their entrance Mary came out of the living-room and threw her arms about Lowry's neck and kissed him. "Well! So you've been to church, you old heathen. Hello, Tommy."

He took her extended hand. "Mary, as lovely as ever."

"Don't let the current sweetheart hear you say that," said Mary. "Staying for dinner, I hope?"

"I hope."

"Good. Now you boys go take off your coats and hats and come in here and tell me what Mrs. Hawkins looked like when I forbade her to come to tea."

"She looked awful," said Tommy. "Like she had always smelled a dead cheese in this place, anyway."

THEY CHATTERED on while Lowry stood near the cold fireplace. As long as there was very deep shadow he found he could not get glimpses of the thing. That is, not at first. But when he would turn his head it would briefly seem to appear in the middle of the room. Now and then he tried to catch it napping, but each time it swiftly scuttled back. He attempted to turn his head slowly so as to lead up on it, but then, too, it kept just out of sight.

He felt that if he could only find out what it was he would feel all right about it, no matter what it was. But until he saw it— He shuddered with dread at the thought of it touching him again.

"Why, Jim!" said Mary, breaking off her conversation with Tommy.

"You're shivering again." She put her hand upon his arm and led him toward the door. "Now you go right upstairs and take ten grains of quinine and then lie down for a little nap. Tommy will help me put the dinner on and keep me company, won't you, Tommy?"

"Anything for a friend," said Tommy.

It made Jim vaguely uneasy to leave them together. But, then, Tommy must have been here many times while he was gone in just as innocent a capacity. What was wrong with him? To think that way about Tommy! About his best and really only friend? He started up the stairs.

And step by step the "thing" jumped along with him. He pressed himself against the wall to avoid any possibility of contact with it, but the presence of the wall, barring any dodge he might make, made him feel even more nervous.

What was the thing, anyhow?

Why was it tagging him?

What would it do to him?

What would make it go away?

He shivered again.

In his room he found his quinine and, taking it to the bath to get a glass of water, was accompanied by the "thing." He could see it very indistinctly against the white tile. And then he grew cunning. He guided it by slowly turning his head, and then, springing sideways and out the door, he banged the door behind him. He felt better as he downed the quinine and water. For a moment he had the inane notion that he ought to go and tell Mary not to open this door, but then, of course, it would be a much better idea to lock it. He found a key in a bedroom door and carried it to the bath. In a moment the lock clicked home. He almost laughed aloud, and then caught himself up. That wouldn't do. Whatever the thing was, it was perfectly explainable. Something wrong with his eyes, that was all. It was just malaria. Something the doctors hadn't discovered about it.

He went to his bedroom and took off his jacket and stretched out on his bed. The warm air from the open window was very soothing, and in a little while he drifted off into a quiet sleep, untroubled by dreams.

Some three hours later he roused himself. The sun was shining upon his face and he felt too warm. Downstairs he heard Mary calling to him that dinner was ready. Wasn't dinner a little late for Sunday? It must be nearly four, according to the sun.

He got up, yawning and stretching and feeling much better for his rest; he felt good about something he had done, but he could not quite remember, in his half-awake state, just what it was.

The pleasant sound of very high, musical laughter came to him, and for a moment he thought it was Mary. But then he knew that it could not be, for Mary had a low, husky laugh that made him feel warm and comfortable inside, and this laugh—there was something unearthly about it. Hadn't he heard it before?

He leaped up and opened the hall door, but it was not coming from downstairs. He went to the window and looked out, but there wasn't anyone on the walk or in the yard. Where was the laughter coming from? What was it that was laughing?

And then he saw a movement as though something had run down the wall to get behind him. He whirled. There was a flurry as if something

had dived behind him again. He spun around.

But it was to no avail. And the thing he had so carefully locked away was still with him—and the thing was the source of the laughter.

What a mad laugh it was!

He felt very tired. Best to ignore it, whatever it was; best to walk around and not hear and not see it; best to pretend that it wasn't there at all. Would Mary and Tommy hear it?

Resignedly he went to the bathroom and washed.

"Jim? Jim, you old ox, aren't you ever coming down?"

"Coming, Mary." He'd better not appear too shaken.

WHEN he entered the dining room the table was spread with bright crystal and silver and china, and a big capon was steaming away on a platter flanked by mashed potatoes and green peas.

"Well, sir! You look better," said Tommy.

"He didn't get any sleep last night," said Mary. "Come, Jim, m'lad, up with the tools and carve away."

He sat down at the head of the board, and Tommy sat at his right. He looked down the table at Mary and smiled. How beautiful was this wife of his, and how tingly she made him feel when she looked at him that way. To think he would wonder about whether she loved him or not! No woman could look at a man that way unless she truly loved him.

He picked up the knife and carving fork and started to pin down the capon. Then, suddenly, the knife was shaking so that he could not hold it. There was a clatter as it fell against china.

Just a shrill, musical laugh just behind him!

"Tommy," he said, trying to speak distinctly, "Tommy, would you mind doing the honors? I guess I'm pretty shaky."

Mary was instantly concerned, but somehow Jim passed it off. Tommy went to work on the capon and Mary served up the vegetables—stealing quiet glances of wonder at Jim. Then everything was all served and they were ready to begin.

"Some chicken," said Tommy.

"Ought to be, what it cost!" said Mary. "The price of food can't go any higher and still let the clouds go by."

"Yeah," said Tommy in a slow drawl, "and wages stay the same. That is what is known as economic progress—get everything so high that nobody can buy so that there will be surplus which the government can buy and throw away so that the taxpayer will have less money with which to buy higher-priced goods. Yes, we've certainly improved civilization since the days when we lived in caves."

Mary laughed and, shockingly, the thing laughed, too, behind Jim. But it was an accidental combining, for a moment later, at a serious statement from Tommy, it laughed again.

Jim had picked up knife and fork two or three times. But another strange thing was occurring. Each time he started to touch his plate it moved. Not very much, just a little. A sort of easy, circular motion which ceased as soon as he did not choose to touch it again; but when he did, it did. Very carefully he found cause to help himself to more gravy, and then, swiftly, glanced under the cloth and the pad. But there was nothing wrong. He put

back the plate and once more addressed himself to it. Once more it moved.

He felt ill.

"Would . . . would you two please excuse me? I . . . I guess I don't feel very well."

"Jim!"

"Better let me send for a doctor," said Tommy. "You look very white."

"No. No, I'm all right. Just let me lie down for a little while."

"I'll keep your dinner warm," said Mary.

"It was such a good dinner, too," said Lowry with a sad grin. "Don't worry about me. Just go ahead."

And then the laughter sounded again, higher and shriller, and the dark shadow scuttled along beside him as he hurried through the door and back to his bed. He flung himself down. And then, thinking better of it, he leaped up and shot home the bolt. Again he lay down, but he found he did not have sufficient control over himself. Tight-throated and half sick, he began to pace a narrow circle around his room.

V.

A CLOCK downstairs struck eleven in long, slow strokes. Lowry, face down upon his bed, stirred uneasily and came up through the kindly oblivion of a doze. He woke to the realization that something horrible was about to happen to him, but, lying for a while in stupor, pushing back the frontiers of his consciousness, he picked up memory after memory, inspected it and cast it aside. No, no one of these things had any bearing on his present condition, there was nothing that he knew about which might have caused—

A shrill tinkle of laughter reached him.

He came up quivering in every muscle and saw the thing scurry around the bottom of his bed and get out of sight. If only he could get a full glimpse of it!

There was paper rattling somewhere, stirred by the warm night breeze, as though something in the room was sorting out his letters. And though the room seemed empty to him, after a little a single sheet, drifting on the air, came fluttering down to the carpet by his feet. He stared at it, afraid to pick it up. He could see writing upon it. Finally his curiosity overcame his fear, and he opened it and tried to read. But it was written in some ancient, incomprehensible script that blurred and ran together. The only thing legible was a time, and he could not even be sure of that.

". . . 11:30 to . . ."

He peered into the shadows of the room, but aside from what had dived under his bed he was apparently alone. Had this thing come floating in with the wind?

Eleven thirty? Was this a bid for an appointment somewhere? Tonight? He shuddered at the thought of going forth again. But, still, wasn't it possible that he might have a friend somewhere who was volunteering to help him find his four hours? And tonight he would be wary and step down no steps which he did not know had something solid at the bottom.

He got up, and instantly the little dark thing got behind him, permitting him only the slightest of glimpses. Within him he could feel a new sensation rising, a nervous anger of the kind men feel in remembering times when they have shown cowardice.

For he knew very clearly that he

was being a coward. He was letting these things drag the reason out of his mind without even offering to combat them; he was being thrust about like a scarecrow in a hurricane, and the things were laughing at him, perhaps even pitying him! His fists clenched into hard hammers; God knows he had never been found lacking in courage before, why should he cower like a sniveling cur and allow all things to steamroller him? His jaws were tight, and he felt his heart lunging inside him, and he ached to join in wild battle and put down forever the forces which were seeking to destroy him.

He took a topcoat from the closet and slipped into it. From a drawer he drew a Colt .38 and pocketed it. Into his other pocket he put a flashlight. He was through being a coward about this. He would meet his ghosts and batter them down.

Eleven thirty? Certainly something would lead him to the rendezvous. Perhaps something was waiting for him out in the street now.

The high laughter tinkled again, and he spun around and sought to kick the dark object, but again it eluded him. Never mind—he would deal with that later.

QUIETLY he slipped out of his room. Mary's light was off, and her door was closed. There was no use disturbing her. Tommy must be in the guest room at the head of the stairs, for the door there was slightly ajar. Masking the flashlight with his fingers so that a small segment of its light played upon the bed, he looked at Tommy. Without his cynically twisted grin, Tommy was really a very beautiful fellow, thought Lowry. And Tommy, in sleep, looked as innocent as a choir boy. Lowry crept down the stairs and out the front door, to stand in the shadow of the porch and stare at the walk.

It was warm tonight, and what little breeze there was whispered faintly and sweetly across the lawns. The moon was nearly full and rode in a clear sky, from which it had jealously blotted the smaller stars.

Lowry went down the middle of the steps and dared the walk to open up. It did not. Almost smiling over this small triumph, he reached the street and cast about him. Eleven thirty was not here, but he was almost certain that if he was expected there would be a guide.

The little dark thing flicked about his legs, and the laughter sounded, gently as a child's. Lowry nerved himself to listen to it.

Tonight he would not cower and run away. These things had been strange to him before, but they were not strange to him now. Something would come to lead him, and he would be brave and carry out—

"Jim!"

He saw Tommy silhouetted in an upstairs window.

"Jim! Where are you going?"

But there was something moving under a tree ahead and it was beckoning to him.

"Jim! At least wait until I give you your hat!"

He felt a cold shudder race over him. The thing was beckoning more strenuously, and he sped toward it.

At first he could not make out what it was, so deep was the moon shadow there. But in a moment he saw that it was a cassocked little figure not more than four feet high, with a nearly luminous bald head. Beads and a cross hung about its neck, and crude leather sandals exposed its toes.

"You received my message?"

"Yes. Where are we going?" asked Lowry.

"You know as well as I do, don't you?"

"No."

"Well-l-l-l— You know me, don't you?"

Lowry looked at him more closely. There seemed to be an intangible quality to this little monk, as if he was lacking substance. And then Lowry found that he could see through him and behold the tree trunk and the moon-bathed curb.

"I am Sebastian. You turned me out of my tomb about six years ago. Don't you remember?"

"The church tombs of Chezetol!"

"Ah, you do remember. But do not think I am angry. I am a very humble fellow, and I am never angry, and if I have to wander now without a home, and if my body was the dust which your diggers' spades broke, I still am not angry. I am a very humble person." And, indeed, he was almost cringing. But still there was a certain sly way he cast his eyes sideways at Jim that made one wonder. "I had been lying there for three hundred years, and you, thinking it was an old Aztec ruin because of the Aztec symbols on the stones which had been converted to its construction, dug me up. Where is my belt?"

"Your belt?"

"Yes, my beautiful golden belt. You picked it up and turned to your guide and said, 'What's this? A gold belt marked with the symbols of the Catholic Church! I thought this was an Aztec ruin. A week's digging for nothing but a golden belt.'"

"It is in the college museum."

"I was a little hurt about it," said Sebastian sadly. "'—for nothing but a golden belt.' I liked it because I made it, you see, and we thought it was very beautiful. We converted Razchytl to Christianity, and then we took his gold and made sacred vessels of it, and when he died on the mining gangs we even went so far as to bury him with a golden cross. May I have my belt?"

"I can't get it for you now."

"Oh, yes, you must. Otherwise I won't go with you and show you."

"Show me what?"

"Where you spent your four hours."

Lowry pondered for a little while and then nodded. "All right. We'll get your belt. Come with me."

LOWRY WALKED swiftly up the street, the little dark shadow just behind the range of his eye to the left, Sebastian a step behind upon his right. Sebastian's crude slippers made no sound upon the pavement.

It was a very short distance to the building which housed the museum, and Lowry was soon fumbling for his keys. The door opened into the blackness, but Lowry knew the place by heart and did not turn on his light until he was near the case which held the golden belt. He fumbled for more keys and, switching on his flash, started to fit one. He stopped. He played his light upon the objects within. The belt was gone!

Nervously he turned to Sebastian. "The belt isn't here. They must have sold it to another museum while I was gone."

Sebastian's head was cast down. "It is gone, then. And I shall never get it back—but I am not angry. I am a very humble person. I am never angry. Good-by, Señor Lowry."

"Wait! I'll try to get your belt back. I'll buy it back and put it somewhere where you can find it!"

Sebastian paused at the door and then dodged aside. A beam of light stabbed down the aisle. It was Terence, the college watchman.

"Who is in here?" cried Terence, trying to make his voice sound very brave.

"It is I," said Lowry, moving into the path of the light and blinking at its source.

"Oh. Professor Lowry! Sure, and you gave me an awful scare there for a moment. This is no time to be tinkering around with them trinkets."

"I was doing some research," said Lowry. "I needed a certain inscription for a class lecture tomorrow."

"Did you find it?"

"No. It isn't here any more. I suppose they've sold it."

"Jebson would sell his own mother, Professor Lowry, and I mean what I say. He's cut my pay, that's what he's done. I was terribly sorry to hear what he did to you. I thought that was a pretty good article you wrote, too."

"Thank you," said Lowry, moving to the door, panicky lest Sebastian be frightened away.

"Course you laid it on a bit thick, Professor Lowry. Now, in the old country I could show you people that could tell you about having met a lot of things they couldn't explain. It ain't healthy to go around begging the demons to smash you."

"Yes. Yes, I'm sure it isn't. I've got to be going, Terence, but if you'd like to drop around to my office some afternoon when you get up, I'd be glad to hear about your evidence."

"Thank you, Professor Lowry. Thank you. That I will."

"Good night, Terence."

"Good night, Professor Lowry."

Lowry walked swiftly toward the deepest shade of the street, and when he was sure he was out of Terence's sight he began to cast around for some sign of Sebastian. But all he could glimpse was the occasional flick of the dark object which traveled with him.

When he had searched around and about for nearly twenty minutes, a low call reached him. And there was Sebastian hiding by a bush.

"Oh," said Lowry in relief. "I hoped you hadn't gone. I wanted to tell you that if you would wait awhile I would buy back the golden belt."

"I am not angry," said Sebastian.

"But you want your belt, don't you?"

"It would please me very much. It was such a pretty belt. I made it with my own hands with many humble prayers to God, and though the metal is heathen the work was the work of love."

"You shall have your belt. But tonight you must take me to the place where I can find the four hours."

"You are determined to find them, then?"

"I am."

"Jim Lowry, I wonder if you know what it will cost to find them."

"Whatever the cost, I intend to do so."

"You are brave tonight."

"Not brave. I know what I must do, that is all."

"Jim Lowry, last night you met some things."

"Yes."

"Those things were all working on your side. They were the forces of good. You did not lose your four hours to them, Jim Lowry. Nor to me."

"I must find them."

"You could not conceive the forces of the other side. You could not conceive so much pain and terror and evil. If you are to find those four hours you must be prepared to face those other forces."

"I must find them."

Above the hook, he sensed a presence. "Now just hold on tight," said a somewhat oily voice, "and everything will be all right—"

"Then, Jim Lowry, have faith in me and I shall show you part of the way. The rest of the way you must go alone."

"Lead and I shall follow."

SEBASTIAN'S delicate little hand made the sign of the cross upon the air and then moved out to point an upward way. Lowry found that he was upon a smoothly blue roadway which wound upward and onward as though to the moon itself.

Sebastian gripped his beads and began to walk. Lowry glanced around him, but for all he searched, he could not find the small black object, nor could he hear its laughter—if it was the source of that laughter.

They went a long way, past spreading fields and little clusters of sleeping houses. Once a thing with bowed head and hidden face passed them, going down with slow and weary steps, but Lowry could not understand what it was.

The way began to be broken as though it had once consisted of steps which had disintegrated to rubble; tufts of grass began to be more frequent in the cracks, showing that the way was little used. Ahead, a smoky outline of mountains took slow form and then it seemed to Lowry that they had come upon them swiftly. The road began to writhe and dip on hillsides, lurching out and then standing almost on edge toward the inside, as though earthquakes and avalanches had here been steadily at work. And even as they passed over it, it occasionally trembled, and once, with a sigh which ended in a roar, a whole section of it went out behind them, leaving a void. Lowry began to worry about ever being able to get back.

"It gets more difficult now," said Sebastian. "Have you ever climbed mountains."

"Not often."

"Well—you look strong enough."

Sebastian headed off at right angles to the dwindling road and walked easily up a nearly vertical cliff. Lowry reached up and found to his astonishment that although the cliff had looked very high at first, it was only eight or nine feet and he ascended easily. For a way, then, they walked along its rim, and the road fell swiftly away until it was less than a white string. The wind was a little stronger up here, but it was still warm, and the moon was friendly. There seemed to be good cause for them to be as unseen as possible, for now Sebastian was pressing back against yet another cliff, one which really was high.

"It is a little worse now," said Sebastian. "Be very careful."

They had come to the end of both cliffs, and here a right-angle turn folded away from them, offering only rough stone to their questing touch.

Lowry looked down and felt slightly ill. He disliked height no more than another man, but the cliff here pitched off forever and was consecutive in his sight, so that he could visualize falling through that space. Far, far down a small stream, like a piece of bright wire, wound its way through a rocky gorge, and here and there on the vertical face, trees, diminutive with distance, jutted out like staying hands. Sebastian had gone on around the turn. Lowry reached, and then reached again, but he could find no purchase.

Leaning far out, he saw a ledge. It seemed to him that if he could half fall and reach at the same time, he could grip it. He leaned out, he snatched wildly. He had hold of the

ledge, and his legs were being pulled at by the drop below.

"Work along," said Sebastian.

Lowry inched himself along. It was very hard to keep hold of the ledge, for it was rough and hurt his hands and sloped a trifle outward. He tried to see Sebastian, but he could not because of his own arm. He began to be weary, and a nausea of terror came into him, as though something was staring at him, ready to pry him loose. He stared up at the ledge.

A GREAT splotch of black was hovering there, and two large eyes peered luminously down with malevolence!

Lowry glanced down and saw emptiness under him.

There was a gentle, purring sound, and the dark object loomed higher. Something began slowly to pry Lowry's fingers off the ledge.

"Sebastian!"

There was no answer from the monk.

"*Sebastian!*"

The purring over his head grew louder and more pleased.

One hand was almost loose, and then it was loose! Lowry dangled in space as the thing began slowly and contentedly to loosen his left hand. He remembered the gun and snatched it from his pocket and pointed it up.

The eyes did not change. The purring was softer. Suddenly Lowry was aware of a reason he could not pronounce that he must not shoot. To do so would bring a whole pack down upon him, and it was doubtful if his bullets would take any effect. His left hand came free and he swooped away from the ledge with the air screaming past his face and up his nose, and the greedy, dark drowning him.

He was aware of stars and the moon all mingled in a spinning dance, and the cliff side rolling upward at incredible speed, and the bright wire of the stream but little closer than it had been when he had first begun to fall.

He had no memory of landing. He was lying on a surface so smooth that it was nearly metallic. Stunned, he got to his knees and stared over the edge of this second ledge, to find that the stream was still down there, but that his fall had evidently been broken by trees.

Where was Sebastian?

He looked up but could find no sign of the thing which had pried him loose. He looked to the right and left, but he could discover no descent from this place. Pressing against the cliff, he edged along. There were small caves here whose dark mouths held things he could sense but dimly. He knew he must not enter them. But still—still, how else could he ever get down?

One cave was larger than the rest, and though his resolution had ebbed considerably, he knew that he must go in. On hands and knees he crept over the lip, and his hands met a furry something which made him leap back. Something struck him lightly from behind and drove him to his knees once more. The floor of this place was furry, all of it, dry and ticklish to the touch.

A deep, unconcerned voice said, "Go along ahead of me, please."

He dared not look back at the speaker, whatever it was. He got up and went along. There were great flat ledges in the place over which he stumbled now and then. Evidently he had lost his flashlight, but he would have been afraid to have used it. There was something awful in this place, something he could not define, but which waited

in patient stillness for him perhaps around the next bend, perhaps around the one after that— He came up against a rough wall which bruised him.

"Please go along," said the voice behind him in a bored fashion.

"Where . . . where is Sebastian?" he ventured.

"You are not with *them* now. You are with us. Be as little trouble as you can, for we have a surprise waiting for you down one of these tunnels. The opening, you poor fool, is on your right. Don't you remember?"

"I . . . I've never been here before?"

"Oh, yes, you have. Oh, yes, indeed, you have. Hasn't he?"

"Certainly he has," said another voice at hand.

"Many, many times."

"Oh, not many," said the other voice. "About three times is all. That is, right here in this place."

"Go along," yawned the first voice.

It was all he could do to force his legs to work. Something unutterably horrible was waiting for him, something he dared not approach, something which, if he saw it, would drive him mad!

"You belong to us, now, so go right along."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"You'll find out."

There was an incline under his feet, and at each step things seemed to wake beneath his feet and go slithering away, nearly tripping him, sometimes curling about his ankles, sometimes striking hard against him.

The incline was very long, and there was blackness at its bottom. He must not go down here! He must not go down here! He had to turn back while there was yet time!

"Go along," said the bored voices. "You are ours now."

Ahead there was only stillness. Ahead— Lowry sank down on the ramp, too ill and weak to go on, too terrified of what lay just ahead to take another step. Everything was spinning and things were howling at him.

And then he heard Sebastian's quiet little voice speaking long, monotonous sentences in Latin.

Sebastian!

Lowry pulled himself up and staggered on toward the sound. He was not sure but what the way had forked and that he had taken another route down. He was not sure of anything but Sebastian's voice.

He rounded a corner and blinked in a subdued light which came from a stained window high up. This place was mainly shadows and dust, but little by little he made out other things. There were seven bulls, carved from stone, all along a high ledge; and each bull had one hoof poised upon a round ball as his incurious stone eyes regarded the scene below.

The floor was very slippery, so that it was hard to stand, and Lowry hung hard upon a filthy drapery on his right.

The room was full of people, half of them men, half of them women, with Sebastian standing at a tiny altar a little above their heads. Sebastian's graceful hands were making slow, artistic motions over the heads, and his eyes were raised upward to meet the rays which came down from the high window. A gigantic book was open before him, and a cross and sacred ring lay upon it to hold its place. And around him, in a wide circle, filed the women.

They were lovely women, all

dressed in white save for the single flash of red which came from their capes as they moved; their faces were saintly and innocent, and their movements graceful and slow.

Just outside this moving circle of women stood another circle, but of men. These were also dressed in white, but their faces were not pure; rather, they were grinning and evil. Their white capes were stained with something dark which they made no effort to hide.

Sebastian prayed on and moved his hands over their heads to bless them. The circle of women moved slowly and quietly around him, but did not look up at him save when they passed the front of the altar. The circle of men paid no attention whatever to Sebastian.

And then Lowry was made almost to cry out. For he saw what they were doing. As the circle of women passed behind the altar, the men would suddenly reach out with clawed hands, and the women, with abruptly lascivious eyes, would glance over the shoulder at the men, and then, with reformed innocence of expression, file past the front of the altar again. The men would jostle and snicker to one another, and then the next time reach out again.

Sebastian prayed on, his tender eyes upon the square of light.

Lowry tried to get away, but the floor was so slippery he could hardly stand and could not run. And then he saw what made the floor so slippery. It was an inch thick in blood!

He screamed.

Everyone whirled to stare at him. Sebastian stopped praying and bent a kindly smile upon him. All the rest muttered among themselves and pointed and scowled, an undertone of anger growing from them.

The seven bulls upon the ledge came to life with a bellow. They moved their hoofs and the balls rolled, and it could be seen then that they had had human skulls there. Again they moved their hoofs, and the skulls came tumbling down from the ledge to strike in the midst of the angry mob, felling some of the women and men, but not touching Sebastian.

Lowry could not run. He could not breathe. The mob was howling with rage now, and evidently thinking he had thrown the skulls, surged forward toward him.

Just before they reached him he was able to make the incline. As swiftly as he could he raced up it. A sinuous shape shot out and barred his way.

"Where are you going?"

Madly Lowry ripped it away and raced on.

A blow from behind felled him and a voice cried, "Where are you going? You must stay here and see it through!" But Lowry got to his feet and dashed away. He could hear the roar of the mob fading, but he knew that there were other things around him now, flying just above and behind him, striving to dive down and cut off his retreat.

He crashed into a wall, and then when he rose up and strove to find a way out, there was none. The roar of the mob was growing louder. He tore his hands as he tried to find the exit. Then there were knives flashing, and the cold bite of one against his wrist was instantly warmed by the flow of his own blood. He pitched forward and fell from a height. There was grass in his fingers and moonlight above him, and he leaped up and raced away, running through sand which reduced his speed and made him stumble. He could still hear whirring sounds above and behind him. He was out-

distancing the mob, but could he never get free of those shapes?

"Sebastian!"

But there was no Sebastian.

"Sebastian!"

And just the whir of the things overhead and the blurred glimpses of things that raced with him. The moon was white upon a wide expanse, not unlike a dried-up lake of salt. He was out in the open now, and there was neither hiding place nor refuge. He was out in the open and being hunted by things he could not see, things which wanted to take him back!

A shadowy shape loomed ahead, still afar. He forced himself to slow down and turn off away from it. There was something about its hat, something about the dark cloak, something about the thing which dangled from its hand—

Jack Ketch!

THERE WAS a ravine, and he scrambled down it. He crept along its bottom and went deep into a shadowy grove which he found there. Something was calling to him now, but he could not tell what the words were. Something calling which must never, never find him here! There were white mountains around him and high above him, and they offered refuge to him and he went deeper into them.

The trees were thicker and the grass was soft and protective.

Something was beating through the bushes in an attempt to locate him, and he lay very still, pressing hard against the earth. The something came nearer and nearer, and the voice was muttering.

And then the voice receded and the crackling sounds grew fainter and Lowry stretched out at length in the dewy grass, getting his breath. The moonlight made delicate shadow patterns about this place, and the night wind was warm and caressing. He began to breathe quietly, and the hammering of his heart lessened.

It was an almost triumphant feeling which went through him then. He had not found his lost four hours! He had not found them! He raised himself a trifle and cupped his chin in his hands, staring unseeingly at the white thing just before him.

He had not found his four hours!

And then his eyes focused upon the thing before which he lay. He was conscious that he was lying half across a mound, and that there was the fresh smell of flowers too late growing for spring.

There was writing upon that white stone.

But what kind of writing?

He inched a little closer and read:

JAMES LOWRY
Born 1901
Died 1940
Rest In Peace

He recoiled.

He got to his knees and then to his feet. The whole night was spinning and the high, shrill laughter was sounding again and the little dark shape dashed around to get out of his sight.

With a piercing cry he spun about and raced madly away.

He had found peace for a moment, peace and rest, before the headstone of his own future grave!

VI.

WHEN he awoke the following morning he knew by the position of the sun on the wall that he still had at least half an hour before he had to rise. Usually, when that was the

case, he could lie and stretch and inch down in the covers and relish his laziness. But there was something different about this morning.

A robin was sitting in a tree outside his window, cocking its head first to one side and then to another as it sought to spy worms from that ambitious altitude; now and then the bird would forget about worms and loose a few notes of joyous exuberance, to have them answered from another part of the yard. Somewhere, early as it was, a lawn mower was running, and its peculiarly cheerful whir was augmented by a careless, tuneless whistle. Somewhere a back door slammed and a pup yipped for a moment, and then evidently saw another dog and began a furious fanfare of ferocious warning. Downstairs Lowry could hear Mary singing in an absent-minded way, going no more than half a chorus to a song he could not quite recognize. On the second-floor hall, just outside his door, he heard a board creak; somehow there was menace in the sound.

The knob of the door turned soundlessly and a minute crack appeared; another board creaked and a hinge protested in a hushed tone. Lowry half closed his eyes, pretending to be asleep, and saw the door come open a trifle more. He became rigid.

Tommy's face, crowned by dishevelled dark hair, was just beyond the opening, and Tommy's hand upon the knob glittered with its class ring. Lowry lay still.

Evidently Tommy was satisfied that Lowry slept, for he crossed the threshold with soundless tread and moved to the foot of the bed. For a little while Tommy stood there, looking out from an immobile face, as though ready to smile and say good morning in case Lowry awoke—and if he did not, then—

Lowry's eyes were very nearly shut, enough to deceive an observer but not enough to blank out Tommy. Why, Lowry asked himself, did he lie here faking like this? What strangeness was there about Tommy which bade such a precaution?

The robin evidently spotted a worm, for he let out a call and dived out of sight toward the lawn. A housewife was calling after a little boy and adding to a hasty grocery order.

Tommy stayed where he was, studying Lowry, until he seemed quite sure that Lowry still slept, and then, with a glance toward the door as though to make sure that Mary was still downstairs, he came silently up along the side of the bed.

It was Lowry's impulse to reach up and snatch at Tommy's white shirt, but some latent protective sense combined with his curiosity to let matters take their course. Tommy's hand moved gracefully across Lowry's eyes—once, and then twice. A numb sensation began to creep over Lowry.

Now was the time to move. He would awake and greet Tommy—But he couldn't move. He seemed to be frozen. And Tommy leaned over until their faces were not three inches apart. For an instant Lowry thought he saw fangs in Tommy's mouth, but before he could gain a whole impression the teeth had again foreshortened.

Tommy stayed there for more than a minute and then straightened up, a cold smile taking the beauty from his face. He passed his hand again across Lowry's forehead and, with a quiet nod, turned and stole out into the hall. The door clicked slowly shut behind him.

It was some time before Lowry could move, and when he did he was weak. He sat on the edge of the bed, feeling shaky, as a man might who has just given a blood transfusion. When he had assembled enough energy he approached the mirror and, gripping the bureau top with both hands, stared at himself.

His eyes were so far sunken in his head beneath his shaggy brows that he could barely make out his own pupils; his hair was matted; his face seemed to have lost a certain pugnacity with which he had always attemped to compensate for his shyness; obviously he had lost a great deal of weight, for his cheeks were sunken, and a pallor as gray as the belly of a rain cloud gave him a shock, so much did it cause him to resemble a dead man.

He forgot the cost of his exertions and swiftly tried to wipe out the ravages of nerve strain by carefully shaving and bathing and grooming, and when he again looked into the mirror, tying his cravat, he was a little heartened.

After all, here it was a fresh spring day. Devil take Jebson; the old fool would be dead long before James Lowry. Devil take the four hours; as the knight had said, what were four hours? Devil take the phantoms which had assailed him. He had courage enough and strength enough to last them out. He had too much courage and will power to cause him to back down upon his original assertions in the article. Let them do their worst!

He trotted down the steps, buttoning his jacket, holding up his spirits with an effort which resembled the use of physical strength. The dark thing was just beside and behind him, and the high, shrill laughter sounded in the distance, but he was determined not to give them the satisfaction of heed. Despite them, he would carry on and act as he had always acted. He would greet Mary and Tommy with pleasantness, and he would lecture his class as dryly and lengthily as ever.

Mary looked him askance at first, and then, seeing that he was apparently much better, threw her arms about his neck and gave him her cheery good-morning kiss. Tommy was already seated at the table.

"See?" said Mary. "You can't hurt the old block of granite. He's chipper as ever."

"Darned if you aren't," said Tommy. "By the way, Jim, eleven thirty at night isn't exactly the time for a stroll. Hope you kept out of trouble."

He felt a momentary resentment toward Tommy for mentioning it. It was as though Tommy himself wished to keep these hateful events before his eyes. But then Tommy was asking in a very friendly way which could involve no harm. Still —that strange visit, and—

"Here's your breakfast," said Mary, setting a plate of ham and eggs before him. "You don't have to hurry, but I'd advise you to start now."

Lowry smiled at her and seated himself at the head of the board. He took up his knife and fork, still thinking about Tommy. He started to take a bite of eggs—

Ever so gently, the plate moved.

Lowry glanced to see if Tommy or Mary had noticed. Evidently they hadn't. Again he started to take a mouthful of eggs.

Again the plate went slightly from side to side.

He laid down his fork.

"What's the matter?" said Mary.

"I . . . I guess I'm not very hungry."

"But you haven't eaten anything since breakfast yesterday!"

"Well—" Bravely he took up his fork. Slowly the plate moved. And as he stared at it he was aware of something else.

When he was not looking at Tommy he could see from the corner of his eyes that Tommy seemed to have fangs. He stared straight at the man, but there was nothing extraordinary about Tommy's mouth. He must be imagining things, thought Lowry. He again bent over his plate.

But there could be no doubt about the validity of that impression. The second he took his eyes from Tommy's face, Tommy possessed yellow fangs which depressed the outside of his lower lip!

The plate moved.

The little dark thing scuttled behind him.

Somewhere the high shrill laughter sounded.

With all his courage exerted, Lowry managed to sit still. He looked at his plate. As long as he did not try to touch it it was perfectly quiet.

Then he saw something else. When he took his eyes away from Mary, *she* seemed to have fangs not unlike Tommy's!

He stared at her, but her face was its own sweet self.

He looked away.

Mary's mouth was marred by those yellow fangs!

If he could only see their mouths looking straight at them! Then he could be sure!

The dark thing scuttled out of sight.

He tried to eat and the plate moved.

He sprang back from the table, upsetting his chair. Mary looked at him with frightened eyes. Tommy, too, got up.

"I've got to see somebody before my first class," said Lowry in a carefully schooled voice.

He looked at Tommy and saw Mary's fangs. He looked at Mary and she was herself, but he could see Tommy's fangs.

Hurriedly he went out into the hall and snatched up his topcoat, aware that Tommy had followed him and was getting into his. Mary stood before him and looked wonderingly up into his face.

"Jim, is there something I should

know about? You can trust us, Jim."

He kissed her and seemed to feel the fangs he could not wholly see. "I'm all right, dear. Don't worry about me. There's nothing wrong."

She plainly did not believe him, and she was thinking furiously, for it was not until he was at the bottom of the steps—and glad to find the walk solid—that she called, "Your hat, Jim!"

He waved at her and strode out to the street. Tommy found it difficult keeping up with him.

"Jim, old boy, what's the matter with you?"

When he wasn't looking at Tommy he could see those fangs very clearly—and a sly, meaningful look on Tommy's face. "There's nothing the matter."

"But there is, Jim. You leave the table last night and then, at eleven or eleven thirty, or whatever it was, you go chasing forth as though possessed by a thousand devils, and now you fling away from the table. There's something you aren't telling me, Jim."

"You know the answer," said Jim sullenly.

"I . . . I don't get you."

"You were the one that started telling me about demons and devils."

"Jim," said Tommy, "you think I have something to do with what is happening to you?"

"I'm almost sure of it."

"I'm glad you said 'almost,' Jim."

"There was that drink, and then everything went black for four hours and I lost—"

"Jim, there's no poison or anything in the world that could cause such a blankness and leave no effect. Grant me that, Jim."

"Well—"

"And you know it," said Tommy. "Whatever is happening to you has nothing whatever to do with me."

"Well—"

"Let's not quarrel, Jim. I only want to help you."

Jim Lowry was silent, and they walked on in silence. Lowry was hungry now, and ahead the diner was full of clamor and the smell of coffee. He tried not to remember what had happened to him here yesterday.

"You go on," said Jim to Tommy. "I've got to see somebody in there."

"As you say, Jim. Will I see you at lunch?"

"I suppose so."

Tommy nodded to him and strode away. Lowry went in and perched himself on a stool.

"Well!" said Mike, relieved that he had not lost a customer through his garrulousness. "What'll it be, sir?"

"Ham and eggs," said Jim Lowry.

He was relieved to find that this plate did not move. And it began to be born in him that Tommy must have quite a bit to do with what was happening to him. He ate like a starved man.

HALF AN HOUR later he entered his classroom. It was good to be in such a familiar place, good to stand up here on the platform and watch the students pass the door in the hall. Presently they would come in here and he would begin to drone along on the subject of ancient beliefs in ancient civilizations and perhaps, after all, everything was right with the world.

He glanced around to see if everything was in place, if the board was clean for his notes—

He stared at the board behind the platform. That was strange. These were always washed over the week

end. What was that sentence doing there?

"You are the Entity. Wait for us in your office."

What curious script it was! Not unlike that note he had gotten in some way, but this he could very clearly read. Entity? You are the Entity? What could that be about? Wait in his office? For whom? For what? A sick feeling of impending disaster began to take hold of him. What trick was this? He snatched up an eraser and furiously rubbed back and forth across the message.

At first it would not erase, and then, slowly, when he wiped across the first word, it vanished. Then the second, the third, the fourth! It was erasing now! He finished it so thoroughly that no slightest mark of it was left.

And then, first word, second word, letter by letter with slow cadence, appeared once more. He began to quiver.

Again he grabbed the eraser and rubbed the message out. Slowly, letter by letter, it appeared again.

"You are the Entity. Wait for us in your office."

He flung the eraser away from him just as the first two students entered. He wondered what they would think about the message. Perhaps he could trump up some excuse, include it in the lesson— No, pupils were used to weird statements on blackboards, hold-overs from past classes. He had better ignore it completely.

The class shuffled and moved seats and greeted one another the width and length of the room. A girl had a new dress and was being casual. A boy had a new sweetheart and was trying to act very manly in her sight and very careless before his own friends. The rattling and talking and scraping gradually died down. A bell rang. Lowry began his lecture.

Only long habit and much reading from the book carried him through. Now and then, during the hour, his own words came into his consciousness for a moment and he seemed to be talking rationally enough. The students were making notes and dozing and whispering and chewing gum—it was a normal enough class, and obviously they saw nothing wrong.

"This fallacious belief and the natural reluctance of the human being to enter in upon and explore anything so intimately connected with the gods as sickness served as an effective barrier for centuries to any ingress into the realm of medical science. In China—"

Waiting in his office? What could be waiting? And what did it mean, Entity?

"—even when medicinal means were discovered by which fever could be induced or pain lessened, the common people ascribed the fact to the dislike of the demon of illness for that particular herb or the magic qualities of the ritual. Even the doctors themselves long continued certain ritualistic practices, first because they themselves were not sure and because the state of mind of the patient, being a large factor in his possible cure, could be bettered by the apparent flattery of the patient's own beliefs."

It was a relief to be able to stand here and talk to them as though nothing were wrong. And it was a normal class, for they kept gazing through the windows and out of doors, where the sun was bright and friendly and the grass cool and soft.

"In any culture, medical cure begins its history with the thunder of a witch doctor's drums, by which the witch doctor attempts to exor-

cise his patient." Here he always essayed a small joke about a patient letting himself be cured in a wild effort to save his own eardrums, but just now he could not utter it. Why?—he asked himself.

"Man's predisposition to illness at first acted as a confirmation of spirits and demons, for there was no visible difference, in many cases, between a well patient and a sick one, and what man has not been able to see, he attributes to dev—" He gripped the edge of his lecture desk. "He attributes to devils and demons."

Strange, wasn't it, that medicine drums did cure people? Strange that incantations and health amulets had been man's sole protection from bacteria for generations without count? Strange that medicine itself still retained a multitude of forms which were directly traceable to demons and devils? And that the pile of crutches in that Mexican church indicated the efficacy of faith in even "hopeless" cases. The church! And now that people had turned from the church to a wholly materialistic culture, was it not odd that worldly affairs were so bloody and grim? Demons of hate and devils of destruction, whose lot was to jeer at man and increase his misfortunes! Spirits of the land and water and air, abandoned in belief and left, unhampered, to work their evil upon a world—

He stopped. The class was no longer whispering and chewing gum and staring out the window or dozing. Wide young eyes were fixed upon him in fascination.

He realized that he had spoken his last thoughts aloud. For a moment no longer than an expressive pause would be, he studied his class. Young minds, ready and waiting to be fed anything that any man of repute might wish to feed them, sponges for the half truths and outright lies and propaganda called education, material to be molded into any shape that their superiors might select. How did he know if he had ever taught truth? He did not even know if the dissemination of democracy itself was error or right. These were the children of the next generation, on the sill of marriage and the legal war of business. Could he, with his background, ever tell them anything which might help them? He, who had been so sure for so many years that all was explainable via material science, he who now had wandered far and had seen things and talked to beings he had for years decried!—could he say now what he had said so often before?

"—and because of that very belief, so deeply rooted in our ancestors, none of us today is sure but what there was some truths in those ancient thoughts. Or perhaps—" Why should he back off now? These were his for the molding. Why should he stand here and lie when not twelve hours ago he had walked with phantoms, had been guided by a priest three hundred and more years dead, had been whipped on by things he had not seen, who even now could catch a glimpse of a black object which threw a shadow where there was no sun? These were his for the molding. Why should he be afraid of them?

"Men of science," he began again in a quiet voice, "have sought to clear fear from the minds of men by telling men that there is nothing of which he must be afraid just because he cannot see the actual cause. Men today have spread the feeling that all things are explained, and that even God himself has had his

face gazed upon through the medium of an electric arc. But now, standing here, I am not sure of anything. I have dipped back to find that countless billions of people, all those who lived prior to the last century, regulated their lives with due respect to a supernatural world. Man has always known that his lot upon this earth is misery, and he has, until a split second ago in geological time, understood that there must be beings beyond his ken who take peculiar delight in torturing him.

"IN THIS CLASS at this very moment there are at least half a dozen amulets in which the owner places considerable faith. You call them luck charms and you received them from one beloved or found them through an incident beyond your power of comprehension. You have a semibelief, then, in a goddess of luck. You have a semibelief in a god of disaster. You have all noticed from time to time that at that moment when you felt the most certain of your own invulnerability, that that moment was the beginning of your own downfall. To say aloud that you are never ill seems to invite illness. How many lads have you known who have bragged to you that they have never had accidents, only later to visit them after an accident? And if you did not save some belief in this, then you would not nervously look for wood each time you make a brag about your own fortune.

"This is a modern world, full of material 'explanations,' and yet there is no machine which will guarantee luck, there is no clear statement of any law which serves to regulate man's fate. We know that we face a certain amount of light and, disclaiming any credence in the supernatural or in any existing set of malicious gods, we still understand and clearly that our backs are against the darkness and the void, and that we have a very slight understanding of the amount of misery we are made to experience. We talk about 'breaks,' and we carry luck charms and we knock on wood. We put crosses on top of our churches and arches in our belfries. When one accident has happened, we wait for the other two and only feel at ease when the other two have happened. We place our faiths in a god of good and by that faith carry through, or we go without help through the dim burrows of life, watchful for a demoniac agent of destruction which may rob us of our happiness, or we arrogantly place all faith in ourselves and dare the fates to do their worst. We shiver in the dark. We shudder in the presence of the dead. We look, some of us, to mystic sciences like astrology or numerology to reassure us that our way is clear. And no person in this room, if placed at midnight in a 'haunted' house, would deny there the nonexistence of ghosts. We are intelligent beings, giving our lips to disbelief, but rolling our eyes behind us to search out any danger which might swoop down from that black void.

"Why? Is it true, then, that there exist about us demons and devils and spirits whose jealousy of man leads on to the manufacture of willful harm? Or, despite the evidence of the science of probabilities against the explanation of coincidence, are we to state that mankind brings its misery upon itself? Are there agencies which we generally lack power to perceive?

"As a question only, let me ask, might it not be possible that all of us possess a latent sense which, in our modern scurry, has lapsed in its

development? Might not our own ancestors, acute to the primitive dangers, exposed to the wind and dark, have given attention to the individual development of that sense? And because we have neglected to individually heighten our own perceptions, are we now 'blind' to extra-material agencies? And might we not, at any moment, experience a sudden rebirth of that sense and, as vividly as in a lightning flash, see those things which jealously menace our existences? If we could but see, for ever so brief a period, the supernatural, we would then begin to understand the complexities which beset man. But if we experienced that rebirth and then told of what we saw, might we not be dubbed 'mad'? What of the visions of the saints?

"As children, all of us felt the phantoms of the dark. Might not that sense be less latent in a child whose mind is not yet dulled by the excess burden of facts and facts and more facts? Are there not men in this world today who have converse with the supernatural, but who cannot demonstrate or explain and be believed because of the lack in others of that peculiar sense?

"I am giving you something on which to ponder. You have listened patiently to me for long weeks and you have filled notebooks with scraps of ethnology. I have not once, in all that time until now, caused you to think one thought or ponder one question. There is the bell. Think over what I have said."

Half of them, as they wandered out, seemed to think it was one of Professor Lowry's well-known jokes. The other half, of more acute perception, seemed to wonder if Professor Lowry was ill.

Somehow it made no difference to Lowry what they wondered. He had seated himself in his chair and was avoiding all looks by sorting out notes.

"*You are the Entity. Wait for us in your office.*"

VII.

For some time Lowry sat in his office, staring at the disarranged stacks of papers which cluttered his desk, wondering at the way he had finished his lecture. It seemed to him, as he thought about it, that man's lot seems to be a recanting of statement and prejudice; those things which he most wildly vows he will not do are those things which, eventually, he must do; those beliefs which are the most foreign to his nature are eventually thrust down his throat by a malignant fate. To think that he, James Lowry, ethnologist, would ever come near a recognition of extra-sensory forces—Well, here he was, waiting. Waiting for what?

Those four hours?

The thought made him rise and pace around the room with the hunched manner of a jungle brute surrounded by bars. He caught himself at it and forced calmness by stirring various bundles with his foot and looking at the address labels of the things which had been shipped up from Yucatan. There was a year's work at this classification, and even he did not know what he had here. Bits of stone, pieces of rubble, plaster casts of prints, hasty miniatures of idols, a scroll in a metal container—

To fill his waiting he unwrapped the first box at hand and set it on his desk. He lifted the cover from it. It was just a fossilized skull found beside a sacrificial block, the last relic of some poor devil who had had his heart torn, living, from his

body to satisfy the priest-imagined craving of some brutal deity whose life was thought to need renewal. Just a brown, sightless skull— He had dug this out quite cold-bloodedly, so used he had become to his job. Why did it make him shudder so now?

His name—that was it. That must be it! His name engraved upon that headstone.

JAMES LOWRY
Born 1901
Died 1940
Rest in Peace

Odd that he should somehow fall upon the grassy mound of his own grave, odder still that it would be the one place he had found rest that night. And the date? 1940?

He swallowed a dry lump which threatened to cut off his breathing. "This year?" Tomorrow, next week, next month?

Died 1940

And he had found rest from his torment.

The door opened and Tommy came in. Lowry knew who it was, but he could not quite bring himself to look at Tommy's face. And when he did, as his eyes swept up he saw the malevolent smile and those yellow fangs. But when he looked straight at Tommy it was the same Tommy he had always known.

"So life is too dull for you," said Tommy with a smile. "You wouldn't want to send up to chemistry for some nitroglycerin, would you? Or do you need it?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing wrong, except that one of your students nearly collapsed from hysteria. And the rest of them—or some of them, at least—are walking around muttering to themselves about demons and devils. Don't tell me you are seeing things my way now."

"Not your way," said Lowry. "What a man sees he is forced to believe."

"Well, well, well, old Witch Doctor Lowry himself! Do you actually think those things they say you said?"

"What else can I think? For forty-eight hours I have walked and talked, pursued and been pursued by phantoms."

"You seem quite calm about it."

"Why shouldn't I be calm?"

"Oh, no reason. You seem much less agitated than you have been the past few days, or Saturday and Sunday, to be exact. Is . . . well, do you still see—"

"It's there," said Lowry. "A man can get used to anything."

The door opened a second time and they turned to see Mary. She was oblivious of any stir Lowry might have made in class, and had no anxiety to question him, evidently feeling that she might possibly be the cause of some of his strange actions. She looked half frightened now for all that she was smiling, and then, seeing Lowry smile at her, she brightened.

"Hello, Jim. Hello, Tommy. I just breezed by for a very wifely reason, Jim. The exchequer, much as I hate to mention it, is at a very low ebb, and spring and an empty larder demand some clothes and some groceries."

Jim pulled out his check book.

"That," said Tommy, "is the reason I'll never marry."

"It's a pleasure," said Lowry, writing out the check.

"It's two hours to my next class," said Tommy. "May I be burdened down with your bundles?"

"Such a delightful beast of burden is quite acceptable," said Mary with a curtsy.

Lowry gave her the check and she kissed him lightly. Tommy took her arm and they left the office.

WAS it some sort of sensory illusion that caused Lowry to momentarily feel fangs in her mouth? Was it some way the light fell upon her face that made him see those fangs? Was it a natural jealousy which made him believe she looked lovingly at Tommy as they went out of the door?

He shook his head violently in an effort to clear away such horrible thoughts, and turned to his desk to find himself face to face with the skull. Angrily he put the top upon the box and cast it away from him; but the top did not stay on, nor did the box remain atop the pile of packages; the skull rolled with a hollow sound and finally stood on its nose hole against his foot. He kicked it and it thumped slowly into the corner where its sightless sockets regarded him in mild reproach; one of its teeth had fallen out and made a brown dot on the carpet.

JAMES LOWRY
Born 1901
Died 1940
Rest in Peace

His thoughts had gotten all tangled until he could not remember if this was Sebastian's skull or not, or even if Sebastian's grave had yielded anything but dust and a golden belt. Aimlessly, from the depths of his high-school cramming, came the words, "To be or not to be, that is the question." He said them over several times before he recognized them at all. He essayed, then, a sort of grim joke, muttering, "Alas, poor Lowry. I knew him, Horatio—"

He tried to laugh at himself and failed. He could feel his nerves tautening again, he could hear the echoes of the old mother's remarks. Cats, hats, rats— Cats, hats, rats. Hats, bats, cats, rats. Hats lead to bats, lead to cats, lead to rats. Rats are hungry, James Lowry. Rats will eat you, James Lowry. Hats, you came here to bats, you go on to cats, you get eaten by rats. Do you still want to find your hat? Hats, bats, cats, rats. Rats are hungry, James Lowry. Rats will eat you, James Lowry.

Rats will eat you, James Lowry.
Rats will eat you, James Lowry.
Rats will eat you, James Lowry.
Rats will eat you, James Lowry.
Rats will eat you, James Lowry.
Rats will eat you, James Lowry.
Rats will eat you, James Lowry.

Do you still want to find your hat?

Do you still want to find your hat?

DO YOU STILL WANT TO FIND YOUR HAT?

He threw himself away from the desk and crashed his chair to the floor. The sound of violence gave him some relief, but the second he picked it up—

Hats, bats, rats, cats. Hats, bats, cats, rats. Hats, hats, hats. Bats, bats, bats, bats. Rats, rats, rats, rats, rats. Hats, bats, cats, hats, rats, hats, bats, rats, cats, hats, rats, bats, cats—

Do you still want to find your hat, James Lowry?

"*No!*"

"Then," said a childish treble, "you are the Entity."

He glared around his office in search of the owner of the voice. But the office was empty.

AND THEN Lowry saw a certain movement on the wall before his desk where a bookcase had been taken away, leaving a meaningless pattern of scars upon the plaster. He stared at the place intently and found that it was taking definite shape. First the vague outline of a face, and then, little by little, an extension which began to form as a body. Hair came into being upon the head, and the eyes moved slightly and a hand emerged from the wall to be followed by the rest.

"I would dislike frightening you," said the high, musical voice.

The thing looked like a child not more than four years old, a little girl with long blond curls and shapely, dimpled limbs. She was dressed in a frilled frock, all clean and white, and a white bow was slightly to one side of her head. Her face was round and beautiful, but it was a strange kind of beauty, not altogether childish; the eyes were such a dark blue they were almost black, and deep in them was an expression which was not an innocent child's, but more a lascivious wanton's; the lips were full and rich and slightly parted, as though to bestow a greedy lover's kiss. And like an aura a black shadow stood in globular shape about her. But at a casual, swift glance, it was a little child, no more than four, naïve and full of laughter. The lewd eyes lingered caressingly upon Lowry's face as she perched herself upon the top of his desk.

"No, I do not frighten you, do I?"

"What . . . what are you?" said Lowry.

"Why, a child, of course. Have you no eyes?" And pensively, then, "You know, you are a very handsome-looking man, Mr. Lowry. So big and rough—" A dreamy look came into her eyes and her small pink tongue flicked out to dampen her lips convulsively.

"You wrote that message?"

"No. But I come to tell you about it. You are quite sure now, Mr. Lowry, that you do not want to find your hat?"

"*No!*"

"It was a very pretty hat."

"I never want to see it again."

She smiled and leaned back languorously, her little shoes making occasional thumps against the side of the desk. She yawned and stretched and then looked long at him. The full little lips quivered and the pink tongue flicked. With a seeming effort she brought herself to business.

"If you are through with all such nonsense and disbelief in us," she began, "and if you will aid us against the *others*, then I shall tell you something you should be glad to hear. Are you?"

Lowry hesitated and then nodded. He felt very weary.

"You visited your friend, Tommy Williams, just before you lost your four hours, didn't you?"

"You probably know more about it than I," said Lowry with bitterness.

For a moment she laughed, and Lowry started as he recognized the sound which had been near him so many hours. He looked studiously at her and found that her image seemed to pulsate and that the black aura expanded and contracted like some great unclean thing breathing.

She swung her little princess slippers against the desk and continued. "Tommy Williams told you the truth. You offered us a challenge and said we did not exist, and we know more about you than you do. You see, all this was scheduled, anyway. Every few generations, Mr. Lowry, we even up accounts with

"You," said the childlike demon, "are the Entity. Nothing else is real."

mankind. Such a period has just begun. And you, Mr. Lowry, are invested with control, for we must have a human control."

She smiled and dimples appeared in her soft cheeks. She smoothed out her dress with little-girl gestures, and then, looking at him, she drummed her heels.

"That is what we mean by 'En-

tity,' Mr. Lowry. You are the Entity, the center of control. Usually all life, at fleeting instants, takes turns in passing this along. Now perhaps you have, at one time in your life, had a sudden feeling, 'I am I'? Well, that awareness of yourself is akin to what men call godliness. For an instant nearly every living thing in this world has been the one Entity, the focal point for all life. It is like a torch being passed from hand to hand. Usually innocent little children such as myself are invested, and so it is that a child ponders much upon his own identity."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"Why," she said demurely, "I am telling you that this is a period when *we* choose an Entity and invest that function in just one man. Your Tommy Williams, I believe, knows about it. So long as you live, then the world is animated. So long as you walk and hear and see, the world goes forward. In your immediate vicinity, you understand, all life is concentrating upon demonstrating that it is alive. It is not. Others are only props for you. This would have happened to you a long time ago, but it was difficult to achieve communication with you. You are the Entity, the only living thing in this world."

THE GLOBE of darkness around her pulsated gently. She touched her dainty little hands to her white hair ribbon and then folded them in her lap. She looked fixedly at Lowry, and that slow look of the wanton came into her eyes and her lips parted a little. Her breath quickened.

"What . . . what am I expected to do?" said Lowry.

"Why, nothing. You are the Entity."

"H-he-e i-is-s t-th-he-e E-En-n-ti-it-ty!" growled a chorus of voices in other parts of the room.

"But why do you tell me?"

"So that nothing will worry you, and so that you will do nothing rash. You are afraid of Tommy Williams. Well, Tommy Williams, as well as Jebson and Billy Watkins, is just a prop which you motivate yourself."

"Then how is it that this morning he came to me and leaned over me and stared at my face and I could not move?"

She tensed. "What is this he did?"

"Just stared into my face. And I keep seeing fangs when I don't look at him directly—"

"Oh!" she cried in shocked pain. "Then it is impossible!"

"I-it-t i-is-s i-im-mp-po-os-si-i-b-bl-le-e!" chorused the growls.

"It's too late," she stated finally. "There is nothing you can do. Tommy Williams is the leader of the *others*. And you must somehow settle accounts with Tommy Williams."

"Why?"

"He has already taken from you a part of your soul substance."

"He was here just a few minutes ago."

"Every time he sees you he'll try to take some! You must prevent it!"

"How?" cried Lowry.

But the little child was gone, and the black aura turned darker and began to vanish at the top until it seemed like a small, round black thing. With a smoke puff it was gone!

"How?" shouted Lowry.

Only the echo of his own voice against his own walls answered him. And when he fixed his eyes upon the broken spot in the plaster, it was just a broken spot with no resem-

blance whatever to either a face or anything else.

What had that thing been?

Where was it now?

Lowry buried his face in his arms.

When the twelve-o'clock bell rang, Lowry got up more from force of habit than from any wish to leave his office. A gnawing ache of apprehension was suffused through his being as though he subconsciously expected a blow to smash him at any moment from the least expected quarter. With effort he put the feeling down; he squared his shoulders and slipped into his topcoat and strode forth with watchful eyes. But there was another feeling which was gradually coming toward recognition in him, a feeling that nothing could touch him. And as the first one was stamped out, the second one rose. It was not unlike a religious fanatic's trust in a personally interested god, a thing which seemed very foreign to Lowry. And as he walked through the hurrying crowds of students in the halls and down the stairs, he began to be conscious of his own size and strength.

He was, after all, a big fellow, but, being of a very shy nature, he had never taken much notice of the fact, thinking of his person, rather, as being somewhat underweight and undersize—without really thinking about the matter at all. Some of the athletes of the college came past him in a group, and he noticed, almost smiling, that he was taller and heavier than they. Odd he had never taken that personal quality of his into account. It was like finding a gold mine or having a beautiful woman suddenly confess her love, or hearing a million people stand up and cheer themselves into exhaustion for one.

Outside, a student had taken a seat upon the steps so that the penetrating languor of sunlight could caress his back; in his hands he held a newspaper. As Lowry passed him he wondered for a moment what was going on in the world and so glanced at the sheet.

For an instant he wondered if he were going blind.

There wasn't any printing on the paper.

It was just a white sheet, but for all that the student seemed to be reading it with avidity!

Lowry, troubled a little, went on. But as he walked, the exhilaration of exercise restored the pleasant feeling within him, and he gradually forgot about the newspaper. Several small groups of students were standing along the walk, chattering among themselves. A man was pushing a lawn mower industriously. A boy was trotting along with the yellow telegraph envelope in his hand.

Suddenly Lowry had a strange feeling about things, as though something was happening behind him which he should know about. He stopped and whirled around.

The boy had stopped trotting, but started instantly. The man at the lawn mower had paused but was now mowing again. The little crowds of students had ceased gesticulating and laughing for the smallest fraction of time but instantly went to it once more.

Lowry pondered the matter as he walked on. Perhaps there was something happening in his head, like false memory. Certainly it was just his imagination which led him to believe that things had paused outside his observation.

Old Billy Watkins, up earlier than usual, came limping by. He paused and touched his cap. "You feelin' better today, Ji—Professor Lowry?"

"Much better, thanks."

"Well, take care of yourself, Jim —Professor Lowry."

"Thanks, Billy."

LOWRY WALKED on, and then again he had that feeling. He stopped and looked over his shoulder. Old Billy Watkins was standing like a limp scarecrow, but as soon as Jim Lowry really noticed it, Old Billy went on swinging down the street. And the man at the lawn mower and the messenger and the students—they had all stopped, too, only to resume under Lowry's glance.

That was very strange, thought Lowry.

And something else which was strange waited him when he continued on his way. A horse-drawn cart had been plodding along on his right, and both the horse and the cart had paused in mid-action when he looked away, only to start plodding along again under his scrutiny.

He had reached the small café where the professors generally took their luncheon. He opened the door upon silence. No clatter of knives and forks, no rattle of dishes, no jangle of talking. Silence. But only for an instant. Lowry stepped into the café and the rattling and clattering and jangling started in full blast like a sound track clipped on halfway through. Other than that there was nothing unusual about the place. Other professors called to him in greeting, and the sprinkling of students nodded politely, and he was forced into a chair.

"Damn shame what Jebson did to you," said a young professor in disgust. Somebody evidently kicked him, for a spasm of pain went across his face to be swiftly erased. "I still think it's a shame."

"Chicken-salad sandwich and a glass of milk," said Lowry to the waiter.

He talked, then, with the men at his table about the petty subjects of the campus and told them an anecdote about his latest trip to Yucatan. The feeling of self-possession, coupled with an "allness" of being, put him quite at ease. And a little later, when they were breaking up, he was aware of the fact that he had made his friendship with these fellows a little closer. But there had been something odd about this place all during lunch. He had, several times, attempted to listen in upon the talk at the table behind him, but it had all been sounds; just a jumble of sounds.

It occurred to him that this was Monday and he experienced a feeling of relief. He would not have to lecture again today, for his heavy days were Tuesday and Thursday. He could go out and walk around and enjoy the clear sunshine and forget about these things which had happened to him.

The place was almost empty when he left. He stood for a second outside the door, wondering which way he should go. And then it struck him that all was not well with this familiar street.

Two cars were at a standstill in the traffic lane, their drivers apparently asleep over their wheels. A kid on a bike was leaning inertly against a tree. Three students were slumped at the curb.

These people must be dead!

But no. No, the drivers were sitting up straight now and the cars were getting in motion. The kid on the bike was pedaling away in a rush. The three students grabbed up their books and casually strolled toward the campus.

Lowry turned around and looked inside the café. The cashier was

sprawled over the glass case beside the register. A waiter was poised in the middle of the room with one foot in the air and a tray of dishes balanced on his palm. A late diner was almost face down in his soup. Lowry took an inadvertent step toward them.

The waiter began to move smoothly. The cashier scribbled at a pad. The late diner began to make a great deal of noise over the soup.

Puzzled, Lowry turned away from the college and went on down the street. What was happening to him now?

He stopped at a newsdealer's stand and bought a paper. There was nothing wrong with the newsdealer, for the old man did his usual trick of stalling to keep the customer from asking for the two pennies change he should get.

Discarding the evidences he had witnessed, Lowry went along. He looked at the paper. It did not particularly amaze him that this one, too, was blank, but he felt a kindling of wrath against the newsdealer. He whirled and marched back to the stand. Another man had been standing there buying a paper, but now both the customer and the newsdealer were without motion, slumped across the stand. They did not go into action until Lowry was almost upon them and then, casually, they transacted their business. But Lowry noticed that the customer's paper was also blank. Disgustedly, Lowry tossed his own paper upon the street and returned to his way.

LOWRY WANDERED along in a northerly direction, taking a course which would soon lead him out of town; for he felt a craving for the quieting comfort of a stream in which he had long ago swum and the sound of a breeze in the willows which flanked it. Other manifestations, just enough apparent to make him wonder at them, were met on the way, people and beasts and birds which went into action a moment late. He was convinced that he was seeing late or that his mind, being wearied by the events of the two days past, was not registering instantaneously. He did not much worry until he reached the place where he had intended to rest. It had occurred to him belatedly that the spot was now the site of a cellulose factory; but, as he approached, no sign of factory or factory smoke was marring the sky.

He found the place beside the pool in which he used to dive in defiance of a sign which read: "City Water Supply. Do Not Contaminate." He stretched himself out in the cool grass and felt the sun upon him. How satisfying it was to come here and yet how different he was from the boy who had lazed in this cover throughout the long vacations. Little by little he slipped into a languorous happiness and idly reviewed the things he had thought and done as a kid in overalls. Then he had been in awe of his father, and now he was as his father had been, a professor at Atworthy.

The thought amused him that he was the image of his own early awe, and he dwelt at length upon what he would have said to the boy in overalls who had lain long hours in this very spot, how he would have told him that the mystery of the elder world was no mystery at all, but an uncertain sort of habit of dignity, perhaps grown out of the image of youth, perhaps as an excuse for diminished physical vigor, perhaps as a handy shield by which one could hold off the world. How little that boy need have worried,

after all. The state of being "grown up" was a state beset by as many worries, and just as false, as those of childhood.

After a little he became aware of a swift hammering sound and the snarl of a truck engine. He tried to put the invasion aside, but it persisted and grew in volume and activity until his curiosity was aroused. What was going on in this vicinity?

He got up and peered through the willows, catching a glimpse of a half-finished wall. What was that? He moved out of hiding and was astonished to see two hundred or more workmen carrying materials and hammering nails and laying bricks with a speed which excelled anything he had ever before seen. A factory was going up a foot at a time, yard, mud, tanks, stacks, wire gates and all! And what a sweat of rushing! He drifted nearer and was conscious of the eyes of workmen upon him. The men, as soon as they glimpsed him, looked bewildered. A foreman began to bray curses at them. And within a minute, the factory was done. The workmen promptly dived in through the doors and came out bearing lunch boxes and then, as though this was wrong, the foreman flayed into them anew and a whistle blew and a siren whooped and the workmen sped inside again to send out a great clamor of machinery and the roar of steam. The plant was going full blast. The willows had vanished. The stream of yesterday was a concrete aqueduct!

Dazed, Lowry turned his back upon the place and strode swiftly back toward the town. He was beginning to feel a nausea of concern about these events. How did his own appearance so affect conditions?

The world continued to lag for him as he entered the town. People were still until he was in sight and then they moved, just as if they were props in an artificial scene.

A suspicion took form in him and he suddenly changed his course. What about all these houses?

What about them?

When he got halfway down a block that he had never traversed in his memory, he stepped abruptly into an alleyway.

Just as he had expected. These houses had fronts but no backs! They were sets!

He went on down the alley and here and there people made belated attempts to complete the false fronts and give them false backs, but they were fumbling and bewildered, as though Lowry's presence and appearance set their knees to knocking.

What of the main street? He had never been in many of the stores. Feeling he had to put this thing to complete test, he hurried along, unmindful of the effect he seemed to have upon these puppets.

He rounded a block of the main thoroughfare of the town, but just before he turned the corner a terror-stricken voice reached him:

"Jim! Jim! Jim! Oh, my God! *Jim!*"

He leaped around the corner and halted, appalled. The whole avenue was littered with apparently dead people. They were sprawled against steering wheels and in the gutters. They were leaning stiffly against store fronts. The traffic cop was a rag draped about his signal. A two-horse team was down in the traces and the farmer on the box was canted over, slack-jawed as a corpse. And through this tangled carpet of props ran Mary. Her hat was gone and her hair was wild and her eyes were dilated with horror.

He called to her and she almost fell with relief. Sobbing, arms outstretched, she threw herself upon

him and buried a tear-streaked face upon his breast.

"Jim!" she sobbed. "Oh, my God! Jim!"

As he smoothed down her hair with a gentle hand, he watched the street come to life and resume the petty activity with which he was so familiar. The cop blew his whistle and swung his signal, and the horses leaped up and began to pull, and the farmer took a chew and spat. Buyers and sellers bought and sold and there was not one thing wrong with the whole street. But Jim knew that if he looked behind him those people who now passed him would be stopped again, slumped, their puppet strings slack.

A FAMILIAR figure swung along toward them. Tommy, swinging a limber black stick, his hat on the back of his head and his handsome face with its customary quirk of amusement; approached them and paused in recognition.

"Hello, Jim." And then, in concern, "Is something wrong with Mary?"

"You know what's wrong with Mary, Tom Williams."

Tommy looked at him oddly. "I don't get you, old man."

"Not that you wouldn't try," said Jim with a cold grin at his own humor. "I've had enough of this."

"Enough of what?"

"You took something from me. I want it back. I know about this, you see."

"Well?"

"I want that part of myself back."

"You accuse me—"

"Of being a thief."

"Well?"

"So long as I had all of myself, all was well in this world. Now that part of me is gone—"

Tommy laughed amusedly. "So you've caught on, have you?"

"And I'll remedy this, Tom Williams, or put an end to you."

Tommy's laugh was brittle and he swung the cane as though he would like to strike out with it. "How is it that you rate so much?"

"I don't know or care how it is. What is mine is mine. Give me back that part of myself, Tom Williams."

"And lose my own?" said Tommy with a smile.

"What is mine is mine," said Lowry.

"I believe in a more communistic attitude," said Tommy. "I happen to want that part of you and I certainly intend to keep it." And now the fangs at the corners of his mouth were quite plain.

Lowry put Mary to one side. He snatched out and grabbed Tommy's coat and hauled him close, aiming a blow. Somehow, Tommy twisted from the grasp and, in his turn, struck hard with his cane. For an instant the world, for Lowry, was ink. But he came up in an effort to lunge at Tommy's throat. Again the cane felled him. Stunned now, he swayed on his hands and knees, trying to clear his fogged senses. Once more the cane struck him and he felt the pavement strike against his cheek.

In a little while he was conscious of a face close to his own, a face from which protruded yellow fangs. A sick weakness, as though he was bleeding to death, pinned him to the walk.

Tommy stood up straight and Lowry found that he could not move. Tommy seemed twice as big and strong as before.

Mary looked at Tommy for a long while, the expression of her face slowly changing from one of wonder

to one of agreeable satisfaction. And then Lowry knew why it was. She was nothing but a puppet herself, animated more than any of the rest because she had been more with a source. And when Tommy had taken part of him she had begun to divide her attention between them, for either one could animate her. And now that Tommy possessed an "allness" there could be no question as to which one she would follow.

The gave no glance at all at Lowry on the walk. She looked up into Tommy's face and smiled tenderly. Tommy smiled back and, arm in arm, they walked away.

Lowry tried to shout after them, but they paid no heed. They were gone around the corner.

By degrees, then, the street began to slump and become still. By degrees, but not wholly. Here and there a puppet twitched a little. Here and there a mouth made motions without making sound. Lowry stared in terror at the scene.

For him the world was nearly dead!

His body was so heavy that he could scarcely move at all. But he knew that he must pursue them, find them, gain back that vital force which had been stolen. To live, an eighth alive, in a world of apparent dead would drive him mad!

And Mary!

How could— But she was just a puppet, too. A puppet with all the rest. It was no fault of hers. The guilt was all Tommy's. Tommy that he had thought his friend!

It was agony to drag himself along, but he did, inch by inch, fumbling over the bodies which lay sprawled in the clear sunlight. He became aware of how hot it was getting and of a great weariness. If he could just rest for a little while, he might be able to find strength. He saw a bush in a yard where the cover was thick and he crawled into the coolness. Just to rest a little while and then to find Tommy and Mary!

VIII.

It was nearly dusk when he awoke. He stretched himself stiffly, for he had become cold. For a moment he could not recall the events which had passed, and he came to his knees, aware of a thing he must do but not quite able to place it. This lethargy! Was it affecting his brain as well?

But, no, his brain was all right. Yes! Tommy and Mary and the world of the apparent dead!

And what a tremendous amount of good that rest had done him. Or else—

He peered forth from the bushes. There were people walking along the street and so it was fairly plain that Tommy would be somewhere nearby and that Lowry himself was drawing some of the force in common with the other puppets. Perhaps that would help him! If he could get close to Tommy and then, supported by Tommy's own effect, he could possibly win back what he had lost.

He lurked in the shadows of the street, watching for Tommy. But, no, he could not locate any sign of him. Could it be that Tommy was in one of these houses? Perhaps dining? In such a position that he might look out and see the street?

Perhaps there was another explanation. Perhaps, now that Tommy had all of it, these puppets would go on with their make-believe lives and Lowry along with them. But he himself knew and they—

He emerged from cover. There was a man standing beside the letter box on the corner. Maybe he would know where to find Tommy.

Lowry, assuming a careless air, sauntered up to the fellow. He was about to open his mouth and begin to question when his heart lurched within.

This was Tommy!

Tommy, with a mocking smile upon his mouth and a sly look in his eye!

Lowry whirled and sped away, but when he found that no footsteps followed he slowed down. He glanced back and the man on the corner was looking after him and there was light, cheerful laughter suspended in the air.

Why wasn't he able to face him? Did he have to find him sleeping in order to steal away that which he had lost?

Lowry stopped. Couldn't he be more clever about this? Couldn't he perhaps explain to some of these puppets what had happened to the world and thereby gain help? Many of them could assail Tommy and weigh him down and take that from him which rightfully belonged to the world.

He went along, looking for someone to whom he could broach the plan. A man was watering a lawn inside a picket fence and Lowry stopped and beckoned to him. The man, holding the hose, strolled languidly over.

Lowry was about to begin when he looked into the fellow's face. Despite the dusk that face was plain!

It was Tommy!

Lowry whirled and ran, and again the light laughter hung upon the evening air.

He slowed down, stubbornly refusing to be panicked. There was no use losing his head, for he still had a chance. Not everyone could be Tommy.

Soon he saw a woman hurrying homeward. If he told her and she told her husband— Yes. He would stop her.

He held up his hand and she dodged from him, but seeing no menace in him she allowed him to speak. He had uttered just one word when he saw who she was.

Mary!

His heart skipped a beat. Here she was alone! And he could plead with her— Again he started to speak. But Mary's face was full of scorn and she turned her back upon him and walked away.

It took Lowry some seconds to get over that. But he would not admit defeat. Here came three students. Students would obey him certainly, and these fellows wore sweaters with stripes around the arm. He stepped out in front of them.

When they had stopped and were looking at him, he started to speak. And then he stopped. Each face into which he looked in turn became Tommy's! And each face possessed that mocking smile and slyly evil glint of eye.

Lowry stepped back and kept on walking backward. He spun about and ran away and did not stop until he had come to the cover of the next block.

A woman was there, but he knew better than to halt her, for even at ten feet, by the light of the street lamp, he could see that she was Mary. He pulled his hat ashamedly down over his eyes and slouched by and then, when she was going away from him, he began to run once more.

He fled past other pedestrians, and each one that looked at him was possessed of the face of either Tommy or Mary. And after a little they began to call to him at intervals.

"Hello, Jim," said Tommy in mockery each time.

"Oh, it's you, Jim," said Mary.

THICKENING dark and the thin street lamps' glowing oppressed Lowry. It was becoming warmer by degrees and then, swiftly, turned cold. The house fronts were chill and impassive in the gloom; their lighted windows like glowing eyes that looked at him and mocked.

"Hello, Jim."

And again, "Oh, it's you, Jim."

Spreading lawns and the huddled shapes of bushes peopled the night with strange phantoms. Little shadows raced about his feet and sometimes brushed against his legs with a soft, furry touch. Once, as he stepped down from a curb, he saw a scaly thing dissolve an instant late.

And then Tommy's face, all by itself, floated eerily against the gray dark. The thing was thin and blurry, but the smile was there and the sly eyes regarded him steadily. The face faded away and left only the glinting of the eyes.

Before him a shape had begun to dance, pausing until he almost caught up to it and then scurrying to get out of reach to dance again and beckon. There was a certain mannerism about it that brought its identity to him. Wearily he recognized Mary, her face cold in scorn. Why and where was she leading him?

"Hello, Jim."

"Oh, it's you, Jim."

Shadows and the gloomy fronts of houses coldly staring. Shadows on the lawns and hiding at the edges of trees. Soft things which bumped his legs and a great shadow like spread wings reaching out to engulf the whole of the town.

Blurry white wisps of faces drifting just ahead. Tommy's and Mary's, Mary's and Tommy's.

Above, there was a rustling as of bats. Below, there came up a low and throaty sound. And the smells of fresh-cut grass and growing things were tinged with a perfume he could not define. A perfume. As illusive as those faces which drifted ever before him. A perfume—Mary's. Mary's perfume. Mingled with the smell of exotic tobacco. Exotic tobacco. Tommy's.

The great dark cloud spread and spread and the lamps became dim and the shadows deepened and began to march jerkily beside him at a distance. Each shadow, stationary until he came to it, coming up and marching with the rest. Darker and darker and then no sounds at all. No sounds or smells. Just the thin wisp of a mocking smile, gradually fading, forever receding.

Weakly he leaned against the parapet of a little stone bridge behind the church and listened to the water saying: "Oh, it's you, Jim." "Hello, Jim."

At the other end there stood a dark, thick shadow. A thing with a slouch hat upon its head and a black cloak draped about it which reached down to its buckled shoes. It was carefully braiding a rope, strand by strand. Lowry knew he would rest a little and then walk over the bridge to the man of darkness.

"Oh, it's you, Jim."

"Hello, Jim."

Quiet little rippling voices, almost unheard, slowly fading. And now there was nothing more of that smile. There was nothing in the sky but the vast shadow and the plaintive whimper of an evening wind.

The street lamp threw a pale light upon him and by its light he tried to see the water. The voices down there were scarcely whispers now, only a rippling murmur, a kind and soothing sound.

He caught a glimpse of something white in the water and leaned a trifle farther, not particularly interested in the fact that it was a reflection of his own face in the black mirror surface below. He watched the image grow clearer, watched his own eyes and mouth take form. It was as if he was seeing himself down there, a self far more real than this self leaning against cold stone. Idly he beckoned to the image. It seemed to grow nearer. He beckoned again in experiment. It was nearer still.

With sudden determination he held out both hands to it. It was gone from the water, but it was not gone.

Jim Lowry stood up straight. He took a long, deep breath of the fresh evening air and looked up at the stars in the sky. He turned and looked along the avenue and saw people strolling and enjoying the smell of fresh-cut grass. He looked across the bridge and saw Old Billy Watkins leaning against a stone, puffing contentedly upon a pipe.

With a feeling that was almost triumph for all the weight of sorrow within him, Jim Lowry crossed the bridge and approached the night policeman.

"Oh. Hello, Professor Lowry."

"Hello, Billy."

"Nice night."

"Yes . . . yes, Billy. A nice night. I want you to do something for me, Billy."

"Anything, Jim."

"Come with me."

Old Billy knocked the ashes from his pipe and silently fell in beside. Old Billy was a wise old fellow. He could feel Lowry's mood and he said nothing to intrude upon it, merely walked along smelling the growing things of spring.

They walked for several blocks and then Jim Lowry turned into the path at Tommy's house. The old mansion was unlighted and still and seemed to be waiting for them.

"You should have a key to fit that door, Billy."

"Yes. I've got one; it's a common lock."

Old Billy turned the knob and fumbled for the hall light, turning it on and standing back to follow Lowry.

Jim Lowry pointed at the hatrack in the hall and indicated a lady's bag which lay there beside a lady's hat. There was another hat there, a man's, trammeled, halfway between hatrack and living room; it had initials in the band, "J. L."

"Come with me, Billy," said Jim Lowry in a quiet, controlled voice. As they passed the living room, Old Billy saw the stumps of a broken chair and an upset ash tray.

Jim Lowry held the kitchen door open and turned on the light. The window was broken there.

A mewling sound came from somewhere and Jim Lowry opened the door to the cellar. With steady, slow steps he descended a short flight of stairs, through newly swung strands of cobwebs. A Persian cat with a half-mad looked bolted past them and fled out of the house.

Jim fumbled for the basement light. For a moment it seemed that he would not turn it on, but that was only for a moment. The naked bulb flooded the basement and filled it with sharp, swinging shadows.

A crude hole had been dug in the middle of the dirt floor and a shovel was abandoned beside it.

Jim Lowry took hold of the light cord and lifted it so that the rays would stream into the coal bin.

An ax, black with blood, pointed its handle at them. From the coal protruded a white something.

Old Billy stepped to the dark, dusty pile and pushed some of the lumps away. A small avalanche rattled, disclosing the smashed and hacked face of Tommy Williams. To his right, head thrown back, staring eyes fixed upon the stringers and blood-caked arm outflung, lay the body of Mary, Jim Lowry's wife.

Old Billy looked for several minutes at Jim Lowry and then Jim Lowry spoke, his voice monotonous. "I did it Saturday afternoon. And Saturday night I came back here to find the evidence I had left—my hat—and dispose of the bodies. Sunday I came again—I had to climb in the window. I'd lost the key."

Jim Lowry sank down upon a box and hid his face in his palms. "I don't know why I did it. Oh, God, forgive me, I don't know why. I found her here, hiding, after I had found her hat. Everything was whirling and I couldn't hear what they kept screaming at me and . . . and I killed them." A sob shook him. "I don't know why. I don't know why she was here . . . I don't know why I could not reason . . . cerebral malaria . . . jealous madness—"

Old Billy moved a little and the coal pile shifted and rattled. Tommy's arm was bared. It seemed to thrust itself toward Lowry, and in the cold fist was clenched a scrap of paper as though mutely offering explanation even in death.

Old Billy removed the paper and read:

TOMMY OLD SPORT:

Next week is Jim's birthday and I want to surprise him with a party. I'll come over Saturday afternoon and you can help me make up the list of his friends and give me your expert advice on the demon rum. Don't let him know a word of this.

Regards,

MARY.

Somewhere high above, there seemed to hang a tinkle of laughter: high, amused laughter, gloating and mocking and evil.

"Who ever heard of demons, my sister?"

"No one at all, my brother."

Of course, though, it was probably just the sigh of wind whining below the cellar door.

And next month, fellow students of

The UNKNOWN—

The Mathematics of Magic

an extremely cockeyed piece of logic

by

L. SPRAGUE de CAMP and FLETCHER PRATT

SPONTANEOUS FROGATION

by ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

MYSTERY FROG COLONY IN HEART OF LIVERPOOL—this is the heading that appeared atop a column of data in the Liverpool *Echo* (Britain), of August 7, 1939. The colony is still there. The mystery is still there.

During a midnight hush, officers at the Hatton Garden Fire Depot heard "a peculiar, eerie noise which was very difficult to locate." The hearers had a look around, found nothing. They shouted, and the noise promptly ceased. After a while, it started again. Says the *Echo:* "No words seemed adequate to describe the sound, which was unlike anything they remembered hearing before."

The sounds persisted, coinciding with the coming of darkness, until after about three weeks somebody saw fit to look over a tiny vacant lot jammed between the fire depot yard and the wall of the Post Office parcels department. The place swarmed with frogs!

The vacant lot is completely shut off from the rest of the world, being surrounded by high walls on three sides, and an equally high wooden barrier on the fourth. Heavy rains have made the little area swampy, with a few small puddles here and there.

Night after night, the frogs sing joyfully in this midget haven of peace situated in the very heart of seventy square miles of brick, stone and concrete. They are numbered in scores, perhaps hundreds. How did they get there?

It has been suggested that they dropped from the skies, but if they did, they displayed the most amazing markmanship by so accurately hitting a tiny target, without spilling one individual outside its bounds. No other frogs have been seen within five miles of the spot.

"Were they descendants of an escaped zoological collection," asks the *Echo,* "or did they hop through Liverpool streets by night from their country haunt, hiding by day under refuse, in some instinctive migration to an ideal breeding ground?"

The paper does not bother to suggest how members of an escaped collection or instinctive migrants might have negotiated that high barrier around their land of milk and honey.

Mr. H. E. Rogers, the Liverpool naturalist, at first thought they might be toads, but after further reflection remembered that toads do not indulge in choir practice. Maybe it also struck him that a horde of toads wanted as much explaining as a horde of frogs.

Spawn carried on birds' feet is one possible solution. Another might be Charles Fort's notion of teleportation, frogs being transmitted from some faraway swamp to satisfy the hunger of a frogless area. Still another notion is that life appears of its own accord, in shape to fit existing circumstances, and that this reptilian sanctuary is ground that has undergone "spontaneous frogation."

Nobody knows where the solution lies, but astonished Liverpudlians know where the frogs are squatting. Singing their saga to the moon by night, surrounded by clattering street cars, yelling telephones, and hammering typewriters by day, these invaders from the unknown go about their own strange, froggish business.

THE DREAM

by JANE RICE

● Obviously a silly dream. Such places as he saw in it, and the oppression it bought, don't exist in modern times—

Illustrated by F. Kramer

It all began rather casually in Brown's bookshop, or rather in the rear of Brown's bookshop, where they sell stamps, coins, "Peter Rabbit," backless and sometimes pageless editions bought in lots at auctions, your horoscope for the day or year, and such. An untidy place, the rear of Brown's bookshop, but, as Madeline says, "I could eat it with a spoon."

Anyway, there I was thumbing through an old copy of "Water Babies," with "To Mary, on her eighth birthday, with love, from Aunt Julia," inscribed with many flourishes and curlicues on the flyleaf. There I was, thinking what an understanding person Aunt Julia must have been, how she probably had lived in a house with a fanlight over the door, had antimacassars on every chair, and needlepoint or horsehair covered every chair, when all at once there was Bill Stevenson right next to me, buried deep in a daily horoscope.

"Well," I said, "well and well, well, well. Ah thought you-all was daid, Massa Tom. Where have you been for the last two months?"

Stevenson turned like a startled deer and said all in one piece: "Oh! Oh, it's you. Hello. Glad to see you" —an obvious untruth—"How've you been, and Madeline, and everybody?"—meanwhile stuffing the horoscope back in the little cubicle labeled "10c."

"We've been swell," I said. "Wait'll I buy this 'Water Babies' and I'll stand you a drink." I began looking for a salesgirl, preferably an adenoidy one. I like to hear them say: "Tang-ewe."

"What're you doing back here?" I asked. "I thought your forte was up at the five-dollar counter among the 'Arts.' Hear about something special?"—indicating the auction pile from whence my "Water Babies" had sprung.

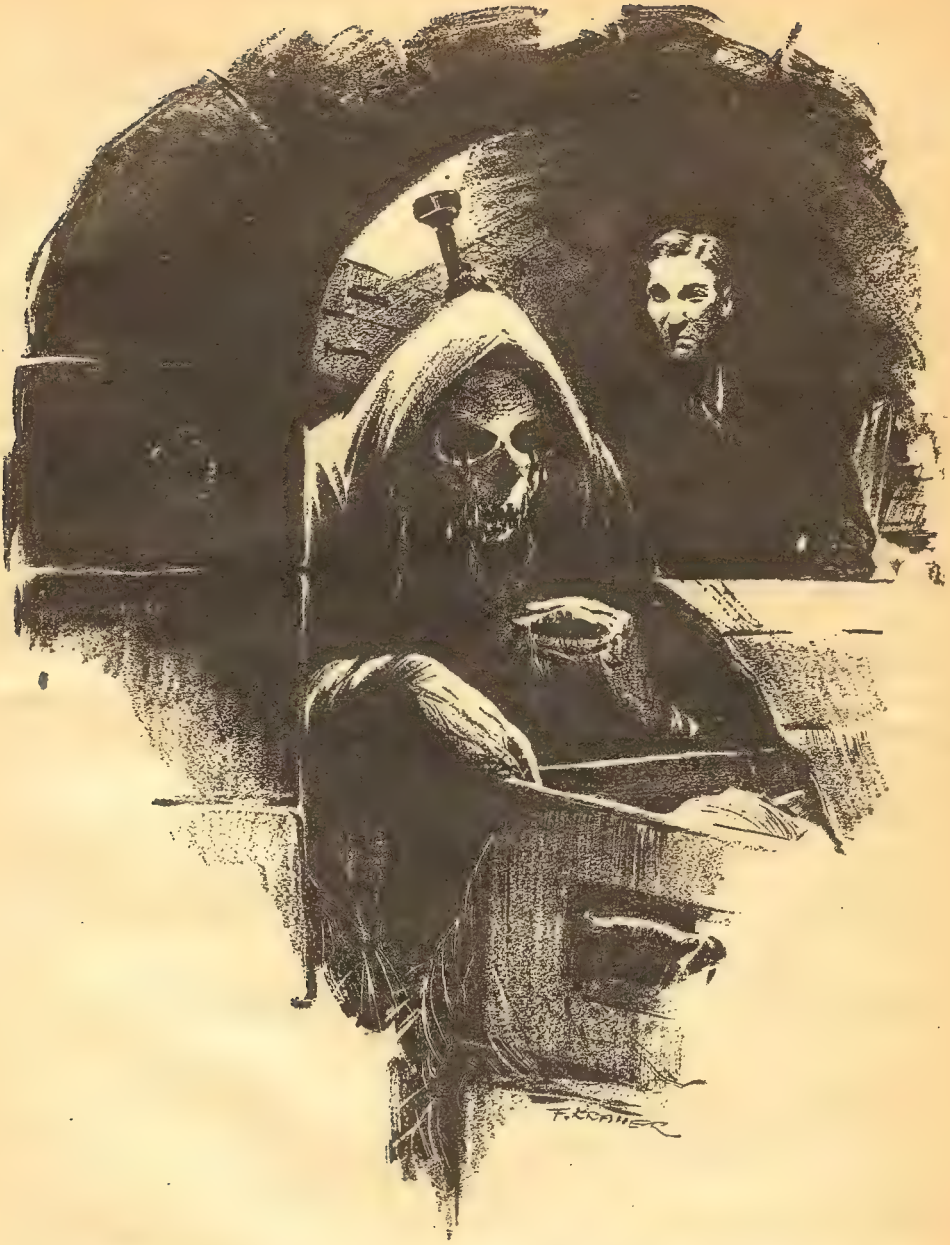
"No," he said hurriedly, so hurriedly I stared at him. "No, not looking for anything." He made a sort of flourish with his right hand in the direction of "Horoscopes, 10c." "Silly things, aren't they? Just haphappened to pick one up. Seems I'm out of tune with the Solar System. Well, I must be going. Give you a call soon."

Now this decidedly was not the Bill Stevenson I knew. The Bill Stevenson I knew was a breezy sort of a chap, every screw loose, and the pride of the regiment, as it were.

"What's the matter," I said, "didn't you hear me say I'd buy you a drink?"

"Yes. Well, sorry, old man—"

"Look here," I said, "what's the matter with you? A month ago you'd have whimpered like a seal and



"It's some dim, stone-walled place, with opened coffins placed about. And there's a Thing that comes—"

drooled all over your coat if anybody mentioned a drink, and here you are reading horoscopes and acting like I was getting ready to put the evil eye on you. Where the devil is that salesgirl?"

"I'm not reading horoscopes," Stevenson said in a tone just one note

lower than a repressed shout.

"Ah-ah, Billy," I chortled, waggling a mocking forefinger, "I've got you there. I saw you. You *were* reading horoscopes."

"I wasn't."

"You were."

"I definitely was not."

"You were, too. All about not vibrating properly. Next thing I know you'll be trotting off to séances. Come on, have a drink. Who cares whether you were reading horoscopes or not? Did you hear the one about the mountaineer who threw his pants down the well and yelled, 'Hey, Ma—"

"I was not—"

"Here's your change, sir," twanged a soft, nasal voice. Sure enough, there it was being handed across the counter by a very charming young person with a high hairdo and lots of uh. "Your book, sir." It was wrapped in thin brown paper, thin enough so the word "Dreams" showed through quite plainly.

Stevenson grabbed the package savagely, pocketed his change, strode down the aisle and out of the store while I stood there stupidly open-mouthed.

"What in the—" I muttered.

"Sir?"

"I said, what in the hell ails that—"

"Sir!"

"Oh, tang-ewe," I snapped. It was not until I reached my front door that I realized I was carrying an unpaid-for edition of "Water Babies" under my arm.

OVER DINNER, I said to Madeline: "Saw Bill Stevenson in Brown's Bookshop buying a dream book."

"A dream book?" Madeline is at her best when she is incredulous. Both eyebrows go up like parentheses.

"Yes, ma'am, a dream book."

"Isn't he the fellow who likes his steaks and his books rare, and throws whiskey-sour muddlers out of the window because he likes to hear them break?"

"Yes, my love."

"And won eight kewpie dolls pitching baseballs at a gentleman of color suspended over a tub of water, and wrote his name on the ice at the Arena with as steady a foot as I ever saw. A dream book! Well, I'll be a—"

"Yes, my sweet, you will," I said, dodging a crescent roll.

There the matter ended. Temporarily.

I shall now whistle six bars of "A Hip and a Hup O'Dooley," denoting a passage of six months during which life has gone on smoothly with only one parking ticket, a dented fender, a stunning blue dress for Madeline in which she gives the mistaken impression of being boneless, an Angora addition to the family named "No Water Foo Sam Pam Toy"—believe it or not—and called "Peaches Gorgeous" for short. Peaches, incidentally, has ruined a perfectly good sweater by pretending that it was a mouse disguised in long underwear, and, happily, chewed up *and* swallowed a letter from my publishers, leaving but the opening paragraph beginning, "Dear Sir: Perhaps you fail to realize that we have not received—" And that brings me spang up to January 17th.

I am prowling about the lower level of the Aldige Museum among a lot of Egyptian mummies whose toes are sticking out of their winding sheets, when I almost bump into Bill.

"Hello, Bill, haven't seen you for a coon's age."

"Not since that day at Brown's."

"By Jove, that's right. Sorry, old

man, didn't mean to rib you so unmercifully. Hope you'll forgive and forget and all that."

"Sure, sure. Guess I was off my feed. I've been sort of nervous lately."

"You do look a bit winded." Winded, my eye, you look like you've been living in a drainpipe. All work and no play, you know. Why don't you artists go to sleep once in a while?"

"Sleep!" He laughed the most mirthless laugh I've heard since whoever wrote "Danse Macabre" wrote it. "I'm afraid to go to sleep." And then, pointing to the mummy of a child: "Look. The poor beggar's toes are all out." He paused for a moment as though to catch his breath.

"What's wrong, Bill?" I ventured tentatively, doubting if he even heard me.

"Do you know," he said, rubbing his fingers against his eyes, "I haven't seen anybody for over six months. You tell me to sleep and it sounds easy, doesn't it? Just go to bed and snore my blooming head off. Well, I've had a man, a male nurse, staying with me since last October just to wake me up when I went to sleep. But he couldn't stand it. Said I got on his nerves. Got on *his* nerves! Good God, what do you suppose I do to my own nerves? He could sleep all right. I used to go in and watch him at it, and feel like a hungry street urchin with my nose pressed flat against a bakery window filled with pies, and cakes, and frosted cookies." He sucked in his breath sharply.

"Say, what you need is a good jacking up," I said, and I meant it. He looked like he needed the ministrations of a taxidermist. "You're all in a lather about something. You need a change or ought to see a doctor." And at this juncture I am struck with an idea. "Look here, I have a friend coming for dinner tomorrow night who is a medical man, so to speak. Why not join us for dinner and afterward you two can go to it across the brandy? How about it?"

He moved restlessly. "How do you mean, 'so to speak'?"

"Well, he's a psychiatrist," I admitted reluctantly, adding lamely: "Has quite a reputation among the bigwigs. All this sleep stuff you've been spilling sounds as though a nice Freudian talk might do you some good."

Stevenson shook his head. "No. Can't. Freud himself, or anybody, wouldn't do any good. This thing has to be worked out. It'll work out." Then he flung at me savagely: "There's a purpose in back of it, I tell you." The way he said "purpose" sounded like Little Orphan Annie describing "the great, big black thing a-comin' down the wall."

"Oh, be a sport. Blatz is the real McCoy."

"Wait a minute," he jerked out. "Blatz, lectures on possession, Evil holding power over the subconscious, Predestination—"

"Yes." The man *was* sick. I began to feel sorry I'd ever opened my mouth. Madeline would brain me if her tête-à-tête dinner developed into a rabid discussion of symptoms over the soufflé.

"Does he believe in dreams?"

"Dreams?" I repeated doltishly after him.

"Yes, dreams. Does he believe dreams have some purpose or influence?"

"Why, that is; well, he thinks—Did you say dreams?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes! Dreams. D-r-e-a-m-s. Dreams!"

"Oh, *dreams*," I said brightly, like an idiot child. "Why, I have

heard him mention dreams as having some connection with our past, or future, or something." And then I remembered the "Horoscopes, 10c" and the dream book. Like a bolt from the blue I remembered and I guess it stood out all over my face like measles.

"Don't look at me like that," Stevenson said impatiently, "I'm not a lunatic." And ever so quietly, he added, "Not yet."

I have a vague recollection of proffering my hand, in the hope of getting out from under gracefully, and then sticking it in my coat pocket because Bill had resumed his meditations of the mummy's toes.

"I'll be there," he said.

I LEFT, trying to make as little noise as possible but sounding like the Indianapolis Speedway.

"Why don't you heat this place and where is the washroom?" I growled when I reached an attendant.

"Heat spoils the corpses; three doors down," he replied.

"If you'd put up some signs," I said pathetically, but he didn't bother to listen. He didn't even remove his eyes from Bill, who he seemed to think was going to snitch a burial cup and run for it, and who, I thought, looked like he might just as well call it a day and crawl in with one of the exhibits.

Dressing, I told Madeline I had invited an extra guest.

"Bill Stevenson," she murmured. "I dreamed about him last night."

"Don't say dream to me," I yelped.

"All right," she said. "It was queer. The whole thing was awfully queer."

"I don't care what it was," I said.

"When you get old," she said musingly, "you're going to be very domineering, and have stubble on your chin, and beat in the tops of your eggs with the handle of a knife."

Which is one reason I never tire of Madeline.

The following morning I feebly offered to call Stevenson and rescind the dinner invitation, but Madeline blew dreamily into her coffee and said: "I rather want him to come, to see if he has any scratches."

"Scratches?"

"Don't repeat, it's a sign of approaching senility. Scratches. You know, long red things on the skin caused by sharp things."

"It must have been the oysters we had last night," I said, wrinkling my nose at her and wondering if all women were as enticing when they ate buttered toast.

"Oysters don't scratch. They have pearls, and lie very quietly on the ocean floor and go *plss, plss, plss* when they breathe."

I made a little hat of my napkin and, going around to her chair, put it on her head and said: "You are either terribly, terribly intellectual or a congenital idiot, and either way I don't see why you married me." I kissed the top of the hat and left her smiling at me over the pitcher of maple sirup.

But it wasn't a happy smile. It was a kind of thoughtful smile and a puzzled one, as though she were thinking something all to herself. Something that bothered her. Something unpleasant.

I was dressed and downstairs doing things with Jamaica rum and sugar when Blatz arrived. A small man who appeared to be hiding behind a thick beard, he, yet somehow, seemed to fill the hall. His eyes, like blue chips with lights in them, danced and twinkled above a

round bulb of a nose. He always reminded me of a gnome who had just emerged from an emerald and diamond mine and was surprised to find the Earth peopled with a kind of animated fungi.

But his eyes didn't always dance. When confronted with a problem, they grew still and quiet and became like cold pieces of slate. I'd hate to have a secret I didn't want him to know. He'd make a swell cross-examiner, or district attorney. The criminals would wilt like so much left-over celery and tell all.

"So glad to be here," he called, in that queer liquid voice of his that gave the impression of being two voices located just back of each tonsil.

Jarvis materialized from nowhere to stuff Blatz's muffler in his coat sleeve and hang both hat and coat in the hall closet. Then he vanished back into nowhere. Jarvis is a wonder. I've often thought he goes about barefoot, but I can't catch him. Been with us seven years and can dish up the prettiest Welsh rabbit you ever saw.

Blatz came into the library rubbing his hands together. "Um. Fire looks good. Someone else coming?" pointing to the four glasses I was filling with shaved ice. "I had hoped we would be alone. Wanted to talk to Madeline about my plans for the garden. She can almost hold a seed in her palm and tell you size, weight, color, number of petals and whether or not it's bug resistant."

"Chap coming by the name of Stevenson." I filled a shot glass from the shaker and offered it to him. "Need anything? More grenadine, maybe?"

"I think so. A dash. And, perhaps, a bit more lime. A soupçon, as it were."

"As a matter of fact, he's really your dinner guest," I said, adding a couple of dashes and shaking the cocktails vigorously, hoping the top wouldn't fly off in my face. "Quite a nice fellow who has suddenly developed into a hollow-eyed, sunken-cheeked recluse and, evidently, spends his days and nights reading dream books and getting hollow-eyeder and sunken-cheekeder. I asked him on the spur of the moment, hoping you might give him some gentle advice." I refilled the shot glass. "How's this?"

"Um, yes. Good. Very good. Now do I get a whole one all to myself?" The blue eyes danced and sparkled.

I filled two glasses. "Honestly," I said, giving him a glass, "the fellow gave me the creeps. Kept prating about dreams. And he was so darned unnatural, as if he were holding himself in with all his might and main. You know how green beer capped too soon sits in its little bottle fermenting and fermenting all by itself, when all of a sudden, *blooie*, and that's the end of the beer. Well, that's a brief résumé of the way he is now." I raised my glass to Blatz in a silent toast. "Before this dream seizure, Stevenson was a great guy, a shade arty, but the heart gladdener of any gathering. He—"

Blatz held up his hand to stop me and squinted through his glass at the chandelier.

"A guilty secret, perhaps? Perhaps no?"

"You mean the body buried under the cellar floor, or the snowstorm and the tiny bundle laid on the steps of a foundling home?"

Blatz smiled. "Something like that, yes."

I thought for a moment, and found myself squinting at the chandelier, too. "No, I think not. Somehow, that isn't Stevenson's type. I think he's imagining things. Hor-

rid things, from the look of him. I like the fellow. Wish you could help him."

"I'll try," Blatz said simply. I knew he would.

THEN MADELINE floated in, a Godey print in a million apricot ruffles, and said: "May I squint, too?"

Then the doorbell rang and there was Stevenson. We all shook hands and silences began to fall with distinct thuds. Madeline picked up the thuds and forcibly made them sit up and behave like gentlemen.

It was a superb dinner, but as far as Stevenson was concerned he might have been eating the lymph glands of the female warthog. He didn't eat, kind of bruised his food, spoke in monosyllables and seldom took his eyes from his plate. Which was just as well. From their appearance I judged he recently had scrubbed them good with a wire suède brush dipped in vinegar. He looked like a haggard edition of Edgar Allan Poe, and I wouldn't have been surprised had a croaking raven flapped out of his sleeve.

Finally, the trial-by-fire was over. I was debating whether to hide under the carpet or make some excuse like "I have to go clean out the rabbit hutches now," and let Madeline fend for herself, when Madeline, divine genius, arose, collected me as with a magnet, and said: "You will pardon us, I hope, but John promised he would look over my accounts," and with a vague wave of her hand she swept us both out of the room.

Once outside she hissed: "Acorn! Were you growing roots? Couldn't you see they have been sparring with one another through every single course? In another second Bill would have begun chewing on the furniture."

"Let me see those accounts," I rebuttaled haughtily.

Madeline flipped her ruffles at me saucily and said: "There ain't been an account for y'ars and y'ars. We'll go in the library and you can read me the next three chapters of 'The Clue of the Golden Crocus'!"

"But I've only finished two," I yipped plaintively. "There's no local color in N'Yawk. My notebook holds only choice items like: Is it true what they say about Dixie? Call Lawndale 6300. Remember to ask Madeline where my studs are. Remember to write publishers, have bad case of leprosy. Remember the Maine."

"You can read me the two."

I did. Had a Peeping Tom been doing any peeping he would have thought us a picture indeed. Madeline, with Peaches Gorgeous on her lap, curled in a chair gazing reverently at me striding back and forth reading aloud with gestures. I like gestures. The hand-flinging-out kind. Always makes me feel like a statesman with viking ancestors. Madeline says the gesture's place is in the home, decidedly.

I was just going after some soda water when Blatz and Stevenson came in. It was noticeable, instantly, that Bill felt much better. Not that he sprang in flexing his muscles and demanding tennis rackets at twenty paces, but, instead of resembling a sick cow, he now looked like a horse recovering from the heaves. Still wabbly, but with good care and a lot of nice hay, he'd be back between the shafts—or is it traces?—in no time.

"Your brandy has a wonderful bouquet," Blatz said, and way back in his eyes was a faint twinkle. But not much of a one.

"Yes, John," Bill echoed, "excellent brandy." He turned to Made-

line, who lazily stroked Peaches Gorgeous. "The dinner, also, Madeline." He turned back to me. "Yes, sir, excellent." He turned to Blatz and said sort of solemnly, as though he were being knighted: "And thank you, sir."

I stood by the door preparing to jump for the soda water as soon as he finished turning around like a dervish. The thought flashed through my mind that he'd turned to everyone but Peaches Gorgeous, who, being a thoroughbred, probably resented it. Was it true cats could see better at night? How would it feel to be a cat and spit at everybody you didn't like, but, of course, you'd have to eat mice. Here I gagged out loud and, as my thoughts shied away like so many sparrows, Bill reached over and ruffled Peaches Gorgeous' fur.

So QUICKLY that I only caught the glimmer of firelight on her paws, Peaches Gorgeous raked her claws down Bill's hand.

There was a stunned silence. I leaped from the door toward Stevenson and while in midair noticed two peculiar things.

With eyes like cold chips of slate Blatz was staring with fixed intensity at Bill. Meanwhile, Madeline had jumped to her feet. She was dead-white, and she said in a low voice: "That's the way it looked."

A damned queer thing to say, you must admit. She should have said: "Oh," or "Get some iodine," or "Hell's bells," or anything except: "That's the way it looked."

"Here," I said, dabbing ineffectually with my handkerchief at Stevenson's hand, which was beginning to ooze tiny red drops. "Perhaps we'd better go to the bathroom and get some S. T. 37, or something."

Stevenson stood there holding his hand out in front of him. "How long does it take a scratch to heal?" he asked Blatz.

"Four days to a week," Blatz answered evenly.

"Then I've got a week at the most," Stevenson said.

Blatz only shook his head slowly. "A coincidence, nothing more."

"Do you believe that?"

Blatz smiled and turned his hands palm upward. "See," he said, pointing to a tiny scratch on his thumb, "a tie pin did that. A scratch is an ordinary occurrence."

Stevenson looked him squarely in the eye and then he laughed shortly. He went over to the cocktail table, poured himself two fingers, drank it neat, and hurled the glass into the fireplace. Facing us, he bowed ironically, saying, "Au revoir—if ever," and was gone.

Any moment now, I thought, the audience will clap, and there will be a curtain call, and then everybody will get up and go home.

"Bill's coat," Madeline murmured.

But by the time I bestirred myself Bill and coat had disappeared into the night and I'll bet neither of them were pleased with each other.

Madeline was having a drink when I returned. Blatz was kicking embers and splintered glass back into the fireplace. Peaches Gorgeous had vanished, the dratted cat, or catted drat. The latter fitted her better, I thought.

"Well!" I said.

"You know," Madeline said, her voice sounding small and queer, "last night I dreamed I was looking at Bill Stevenson's hand and that he had three scratches on it just like those that are on it now. We were standing somewhere, a sort of damp, gray place like eternity must be. While I looked at Bill's hand, it

oozed drops of blood like it did here tonight, and then it healed, and just before the scab began to peel off I ran away because I was afraid. It doesn't sound scary telling it like this. But it was. It was. Oh, it was beastly," and Madeline, who never cries, did. Great round tears. Hundreds of them.

Blatz stood looking down at her intently.

I pulled out my handkerchief, but immediately realized it was the same one I had used on Bill's hand, and threw it into the fire and piled some wood on it.

"There are some things," Blatz said, "that defy a logical explanation. When you receive a letter you often fail to realize that to receive it at all, someone had to write it word by word, sentence by sentence —place it in an envelope, seal it, stamp it, post it. It travels by truck, by train, by truck again, through dozens of hands until the postman rings your bell, you open the door, and *now* a letter. So it is with existence itself. It's like somewhere there is a Power who starts a chain of events, a word, a look, an action, a succession of apparently commonplace details, and then a bell rings, and something of tremendous importance has happened to an individual."

Madeline raised her head. "You mean if, say, you're in a train wreck it may be because one morning three years ago you broke your shoelace and were five minutes late for work. The set of circumstances that naturally followed led to your being on that particular train?"

"Exactly."

"But," I broke in, "you might break another shoelace. Then what?"

"Another chain," Blatz said. "That's what I advised Mr. Stevenson to do. Break another shoelace."

In some way the evening had been turned into something menacing, and when Blatz said he was going—which he did almost immediately—neither of us made any attempt to slow his departure. We left Madeline staring into the fire.

In the hall he said: "John, your friend is having a recurrent dream which is quite disturbing. I suggest that you see him as soon as possible —make it tomorrow. Get him to talk about it. The best thing in the world is to pull it out in the open and view it dispassionately. A dream is nebulous. A dream, alone, can't harm. A mind turned inward is very apt to eat itself up."

"Look," I said, "I'm all mixed up. Where are we? All this prattle about dreams, and scratches, and pulling things out in the open. What is all this?"

Blatz shrugged into his coat. "This prattle," he said, "is an unclean, malevolent thing that has obtained possession of your friend's mind, and must be dispossessed if he wishes to retain his sanity. Or his life. See him tomorrow." And with a nod and a brusque good night he went out, his beard blowing in the night.

I MUST CONFESS neither Madeline nor I spent a restful night. My feet seemed to be made out of hand-carved pig iron and long before the stars even thought of going to bed I had a personal acquaintance with every goose bump along my backbone.

Madeline is made of sterner stuff. She could, I am sure, lie rigid on a bed of live tree toads and not so much as twitch. But she will jiggle her toes when sleepless and, believe me, they jiggled like all get-out.

Breakfast was an awful affair with both of us shoving the morn-

ing's paper at one another and trying to pretend that the other didn't look like he had spent the night with Dr. Fu Manchu.

"I'm going over to Stevenson's this morning," I said, crumbling my third piece of toast.

"That's fine," Madeline said miserably.

"Yeah," I said, making a crumb pyramid.

"John," Madeline said, looking at me directly, "what is this thing happening to us? I'm frightened. I can feel something strange, and dark, and evil, drifting under the doorsills and through the keyholes, like fog, threatening fog. I've felt it ever since my dream. What is it!" she said, tensely crushing her napkin in her hand and shaking it, as if to wring an answer from it.

"I don't know," I said slowly. "I feel it, too, a little. It's like when a skunk walks through a forest. His scent precedes him and lingers behind after he has passed."

Madeline laughed shakily. "You are a darling," she said. "Yes, a skunk."

"Well, I mean, you know—"

"Of course, darling." She rose and kissed my cheek lightly. "I'm going to get some sleep. And, incidentally," she added, pausing at the threshold, a slim, lovely figure in swirly blue, "I'll have Jarvis arrange two everythings to Nassau. I think I'd like some nice, shiny sand, and some bright, glittering waves, and some brand-new air, and maybe a shoe box lunch for two, complete with ants and things."

I walked to Stevenson's. Funny what a walk does for you. It clears the brain. It makes boogies look kind of silly. It recalls old tunes and helps you whistle them. It makes you say "Hi, bud," to total strangers. It makes you understand what great shakes it is to be alive and kicking. It does all that for you. It didn't for me.

I arrived at Stevenson's wishing I had never come and feeling as if I were about to encounter face to face one of those white, sectional garden slugs with pink heads and squoogy insides.

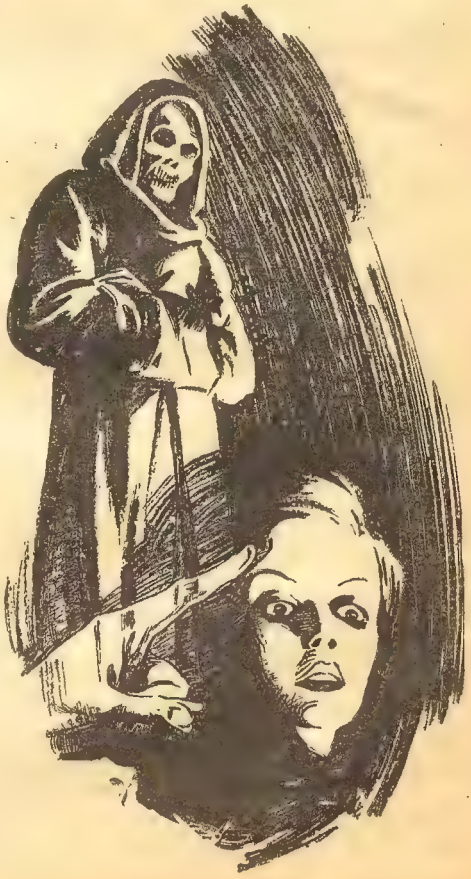
Up I went and rang the bell, and down came Bill to answer it. And in we went practically in lockstep, and Bill said: "Have a drink?"

And I said: "At ten o'clock in the morning?"

And Bill said: "Yes."

And I said: "All right."

Then we mixed them, me doing



the ice and noticing Bill put three jiggers in his, and that his hand shook so that only two jiggers got themselves in, and felt like a nosy parker for noticing.

Finally, after much sparring around, I faced him across the kitchen table and said: "Let's have it, Bill. What's on your mind?"

And Bill said: "Blatz asked you to come, didn't he?"

And I said: "Yes, he did," sullenly like a child, and swished my drink around in my glass.

There was a long silence. I thought, "If I were writing this, I'd have a fly buzz up and down the windowpane for atmosphere." But there wasn't any atmosphere. It smelled like all the atmosphere had been carefully removed with a suction pump and sold down the river. The sole fly in evidence was lying dried up and dead in the sink next to a milk bottle cap. Carbon monoxide, I gathered.

"O. K., here it is." Bill downed his drink and began.

I give it to you without embellishment. Just as he told it. And all in one piece without the pauses and hands running over his face so his eyes pulled down, showing the roots, as it were.

THIS is it:

"It started about eight months ago. I went to bed—went to sleep, and awakened with a start, realizing I was about to dream something. The funny part is, I hadn't really dreamed anything. I knew dimly I had been about to dream something and, to keep from dreaming it, had wakened myself. Sounds dumb, doesn't it? I read for a while and then went back to sleep—a calm, peaceful sleep. The last.

"The following night I had just begun to dream, a sort of hazy dream that I was in a large, damp chamber of sorts when I again awakened, and that night I couldn't go back to sleep. I read until dawn, then got up, ate a huge breakfast of bacon, eggs, toast, marmalade and coffee, and worked on some notes I had of Bigassotis' influence over Van Dourne. About noon I was absolutely groggy for sleep, so I lay down on the couch in the studio and at once fell into a sort of stupor. That is to say, while I dreamed I still was conscious of the fact that I was in the studio and on the couch, and that the eggy dishes were still in evidence by the window.

"I dreamed—I say 'dreamed' because that is the only word we comprehend that fits such experiences—that I was in a great hall. It was black as pitch and damp, as though it were underground, and I received the impression of vastness vaulting away above and beyond.

"I had the only light. A square electric torch that I held high over my head so that I stood in sort of a charmed circle that the darkness beyond could only lick the edges of—not reach. Dimly, I saw that a double row of coffins stretched before me shrouded in shadows.

"There was something about the place that was eerie. Something that made the flesh creep on my bones and my hair bristle like the hackles of a dog. The stillness of it I can't convey to you. It was the stillness of waiting, as if all the people in those coffins were not dead, only waiting with their eyes wide open, their lips parted in insane grins, their ears back against their heads, waiting for something to happen.

"How I got there or why I was there I didn't know. Above and beyond me was darkness, a darkness that seemed thick and clotted with

deeper shadows, and there I stood in my circle of yellow light, listening. Listening, John. Listening as I had never listened before in my life. There! I caught it. No. Yes! A sound. Over there in the north corner. I raised my lamp. There it was again. A mumbling sound, indistinct and, yes, a shadow deeper than the others.

"I moved forward and the shadow took shape and became the back of a man. He was clad in a long black garment like an Inverness cape, and he was bent over one of the coffins from which the lid had been wrenched, as though he were trying to arouse the occupant.

"I felt impelled to stop him. I strode forward and as I opened my mouth to say something—God knows what, for I never uttered a word—he turned slowly, so dreadfully slowly, and looked at me.

"He looked at me, I tell you!

"His face! His head! His head was the head of a man dead quite some time except that men who are dead don't move and this head moved, John. A logy movement, as though it were filled with runny matter. The eyes that glared at me were only holes.

"I stood there. I couldn't move. I was as frozen as if I had been one of the carved figures on the coffin.

"Then it spoke. In a thick, oily voice as loathsome as its face, a voice from hell, if there ever was a hell, it said: 'Having-eaten-dead-flesh-so-long-fresh-will-be-much-better.'

"It started toward me.

"I turned and ran. I ran as if pursued by a thousand devils. Through corridor after corridor and, though I tried to scream, my vocal cords simply would not function. It was as though all of me were congealed except my legs, that pounded on and on. Stairs, more stairs, corridor, corridor, corridor, and always that sound of following feet as I ran on.

"And then in the distance I saw a group of people. Even as I ran toward them, I saw dimly that something was wrong with them. Yet they were people, and blindly I ran on, not thinking, only running, my heart a wild thing in my chest. I reached them. I threw my arms around the nearest. It was a funeral cortege carrying a coffin. Wax figures, John. A blind alley. Trapped!

"Terrified, I turned to face the horror coming. I could hear the stumping footfalls, nearer, nearer, nearer. There he was! I flung my light at him and, as it fell wide its mark, I felt teeth in my neck, warm blood on my hands, and then I awakened.

"I SAY 'awakened' for the same reason I said 'dreamed' a few moments ago. Let's put it this way. I regained full control of my faculties. That is, while 'asleep' I was conscious of the window, and my notebook, the familiar aspect of the room 'as seen through a glass darkly,' while now 'awake' I realized I was in the room and both it and I were normal.

"Normal! I was shaking from head to foot and soaked with cold perspiration. My hands trembled so I held them up and looked at them as a scientist examines a rare specimen.

"I got up and poured myself a stiff drink and remember looking out the window and being surprised that boats were still sailing up the Hudson and that there was a real, honest-to-goodness bird sitting on a real, honest-to-goodness tree that had real, honest-to-goodness leaves on it.

"I threw on my hat and coat and went out. I met Anna and I must have looked like a maniac, because

she shrank back against the wall as I passed and just stared after me with her mouth open.

"I walked for hours, until it was dusk. All the lights had come on and the buildings looked like papier-mâché copies of the real thing. But I couldn't get that dream out of my mind.

"Remember Kipling's story about the man who came into the dining room and saw himself get up hurriedly from the table and go out another door? That's the way I felt, as though I had opened a door too soon and been a witness at my own murder.

"Finally I went to a bar and got gloriously plastered. Anna helped me upstairs when I managed to find my way home. I think she was laboring under the delusion that some girl had given me the well-known works.

"I fell into a sodden sleep—and then, John, I dreamed the same dream again, every detail complete. There I was in that great hall, in my little circle of yellow light, listening, listening, listening. I tried to wake myself up but I couldn't. Step by step I dreamed my dream through to the finish, whereupon I did awaken.

"I staggered downstairs, where I banged bloody murder out of Anna's door and, when she opened it a crack and peeped through under her nightcap and curlers, I practically knocked her down getting inside. The two of us sat up all night. Me crouched in the rocking chair facing the door, Anna, stiff as a ramrod, perched on the extreme edge of the bed with disapproval in every line of her brown flannel bathrobe.

"The next morning she gave notice, but she left at the end of three days. She couldn't stick it out for two weeks. She couldn't stick it out for two weeks, and all she had to do was sit up with me. I was the one who was doing the dreaming, and I've stuck it out for almost nine months.

"Maybe *I* ought to give notice. 'To whom it may concern: I, William Stevenson, hereby give notice that I quit, right now. Look for body somewhere in Hudson River. Signed, William Stevenson. Witnessed, William Stevenson.'"

He slumped into a chair and buried his head in his arms.

I JUST sat there like a stone image. I felt like one, too. A big stone image with a curse on it, and a string of voodoo beads around its neck, and a lap full of human skulls.

I looked around the kitchen. It was just a kitchen. Pots, pans, a plate with some cold meat on it, a thin layer of dust over everything—but there was something else in that kitchen. All over the whole house. A kind of invisible miasma that crept along the ceilings and floors. And it dawned on me with the suddenness of a bursting light globe that Fear was in the house. Fear stalked through every room and grimaced and rolled back its eyes and, suddenly, I was scared.

All through the recital of Bill's story I hadn't been afraid. It had been Bill's dream. But, inexplicably, it wasn't Bill's dream any longer. It was a fact. It was as real as Bill thought it was.

I was horribly, desperately afraid and I caught myself straining every muscle in an attitude of listening.

I put my glass down on the kitchen table. It made a clinking noise.

"I'm going to see Blatz," I said, making an effort to keep my voice controlled, "and I want you to come with me or, if you won't come with me, go over to my house and wait

for me. But get out of this house and stay out of it. It stinks."

"It does." Bill raised his head and stared at nothing with wild red-rimmed eyes. "It stinks with evil, and filth, and a diabolical intelligence directing the whole works. There's a hideous intellect behind this, John. See these scratches?" He pointed to the hand the cat had raked with her claws. "Before last night I used to wonder when I'd get them, but I don't have to wonder any more. You see, in the dream, as I move forward to speak to this . . . this creature huddled over the coffin, my hand swings into the light of the torch and on it are these scratches only almost healed. The scab has begun to crack in some places. Why, in God's name, the scratches!" He hit the table with his clenched fist and then lowered his voice to a whisper. "Unless someone, or some Thing, wanted to give me proof of the authenticity of what I dream." He laughed harshly and poured himself another drink. "Go to Blatz. He can't do anything. Nobody can. Except me."

"If you won't go with me, can I send somebody in to stay with you?"

"Ha. That's really good, my boy. They wouldn't stay. Didn't I tell you I had a male nurse, a great big strapping male nurse from the psychopathic ward at Bonhaven, where all the scares get taken out of 'em early? Well, *he* didn't stay. Don't worry about me. I'll fix this thing."

"How?"

His eyes seemed to hold some inner, flickering fire as he answered: "I intend to meet my destiny, not wait for it."

I should have known then what he meant to do. "Then you won't do what I suggest?"

"Right."

"It's your funeral," I said, and could have bitten my tongue in three distinct pieces the minute I said it. I put on my hat and let myself out the way I had come in.

ONCE outside I stood in the street gulping in heaping lungfuls of fresh air, and then I hailed a passing cab and gave Blatz's office address.

He saw me right away. He looked more gnomelike than ever behind a desk piled high with papers and books with little pieces of colored string poking out between their pages. Like a Rumpeltiltskin getting ready to do the princess' chores.

"Drink?" He nodded at a handsome Chinese table on which stood a carafe and glasses.

"Listen, if I drink any more the

government is going to make me buy a liquor license. All I've been doing for the last two days is stand up, sit down, and have a drink." I sat down for the umpteenth time. "I saw Stevenson."

"So?"

"Telling me to go see him because I'd do him good was like telling Shirley Temple to go soothe a few boa constrictors. I've got a beautiful case of wimwams."

"What do you think?"

"I don't think. It doesn't make sense. It's . . . it's horrible, that's what it is."

"You persuaded him to go away, perhaps?"

"I couldn't persuade him to go to the Bronx. He's sitting very determinedly in the kitchen getting pie-eyed and preparing to meet his destiny, unquote. What do you think about it? This dream he has."

Blatz moved some papers on his desk two inches up, two inches back. He stood up and, clasping his hands behind his back, walked over to the window and stood looking down at the street for a moment.

"I think it's true," he said, abruptly turning back into the room. "Strange things happen now and then. Lincoln dreamed not long before his assassination that he was lying on a bier. In the Bible a king dreamed of a seven years' famine. I once knew a man who dreamed he cut his wife's throat, and so he did several night later; but he cut his wife's throat *because* he dreamed it. Your friend is dreaming because his throat is *going* to be cut."

"You mean— But that's ridiculous—" My voice sounded gritty and harsh.

"Yes, unless we can prevent it."

"But things like that don't happen. This is the twentieth century. Why, monsters like he dreams couldn't exist."

"They don't exist, my dear John. Not in our three-dimensional world. Who can say they haven't a world of their own?"

"But it's preposterous. Why—"

"Not at all. It has definitely been proven there are spirits—good ones and bad ones. Is this, as you say, monster, spiritually speaking, any different than Beelzebub who prowls about the world seeking the ruin of souls, and, mind you, we have the Bible's word for it."

"You make it all seem so certain." I mopped my forehead. "What makes you sure this dream is anything other than a dream?"

Blatz interrupted his stride to light a cigarette. I shook my head at the proffered package.

"Your wife's dream, for one thing."

"I'd forgotten that," I said dully.

"And a conviction that I have—a hunch, if you will—that your friend is not merely 'dreaming.' I feel it here"—he pointed to his chest—"like a signal flashing, a red bulb warning me—danger, Johann, danger. Whenever I get that, I'm right!"

Silence, while he snuffed out his cigarette without even puffing at it, and while I sat looking at him as if expecting a stop sign to sprout from between his second and third vest buttons.

"I think," he continued, "we should take him away for a while."

"Where?"

"A sanitarium where he can be watched constantly until those scratches heal."

"How? He's no sweet evening breeze when he gets mad."

Blatz smiled. "When they take a bull to the fair they bring enough men," he said.

"When?"

"In about one hour."

"Then you have already arranged everything?"

"I told Dr. Kingsley to go ahead unless he heard from me by nine o'clock this morning."

"You didn't expect me to do any good, did you?"

"No." Abruptly his manner changed. "Well, how about some lunch?"

"No, thanks," I said glumly. "After listening to a description like the one I heard about an hour ago I won't eat anything but dry shredded wheat for a month. I'm going downstairs to the bar for a sarsaparilla. If anything turns up let me know. If not, see you in an hour," and, picking up my hat, I went out.

I HAD just finished pleating my twelfth paper napkin when someone tapped me on the shoulder. It was Blatz. One look at his face was enough.

"He wasn't there!" I said.

Blatz didn't even have to answer.

"What do we do now?"

Blatz shrugged. "We make the rounds of the hospitals, and morgues, and we notify the bureau of missing persons."

We did, and for four days nothing happened. And for four days something kept nagging at the back of my mind, some clue to Stevenson's whereabouts. Each time I almost had it within my grasp it eluded me and lost itself amid the mess of junk that cluttered up my mind.

Madeline had gone to Nassau. I was to meet her there the following Wednesday. And then on Sunday night—

I sat up in bed and put down the book I was trying to read. I looked at my watch. It was five minutes past twelve. Then I watched the phone on the night stand. I knew it was going to ring. I knew it with a certainty that didn't amaze me at all. "Something is happening," I thought. "It isn't even about to happen, it's happening right now, right this minute."

And then the phone rang shrilly, as if it were trying to scream. I picked it up.

"Yes?"

"Nassau calling. One moment, puhlehease."

Madeline's voice on the wire, hurried and breathless:

"John. Are you there, John?"

"Yes, darling."

"Listen." Her words tumbled over themselves. "Something terrible has happened. In a big, gray building on the corner of Oak and Spring. I don't know what has happened, but I'm sure it's something ghastly, John. I saw the building quite plainly. There are two stone lions at the entrance. You must go there at once."

"I'm on my way."

"I . . . I think it's about Bill." Her voice was faint and far away.

"Don't worry, darling, I'm practically there," and I hung up without even saying good-by.

The museum! Of course, the museum. Fool! Why hadn't I known? Where else on God's green earth would you find "a great hall lined with coffins"? Cursing, I dialed Blatz and his sleep-sodden voice became crisp and sharp before I had babbled more than a couple of sentences.

"Meet you there in thirty minutes," and the click at the other end of the wire told me he meant it.

How I got dressed and down there in thirty minutes is a blank. I have a vague recollection of the cord to my pajamas being caught in the car door and streaming in the wind. I also remember shrieking brakes and

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a man leaping for the curb and shaking his first at me as I swept by, a Pegasus on wheels. There was a kaleidoscopic succession of neon signs and then I arrived with a flourish, literally.

Blatz and a stranger, whom he introduced briefly as Sergeant McKloskey, were waiting and, without further ado, in we went.

We left the sergeant at the front door after he had carefully opened it for us with one of a bunch of innocent-looking keys.

"If you boys are pullin' a fast one—" he began, but didn't finish. I guess we didn't look like we were in the mood for pullin' a fast one. I, for one, felt deadly in earnest.

Blatz switched on the lights inside the door. I started toward the lower level where I knew the sarcophagi were kept, but Blatz shook his head.

"Remember," he quoted, " 'I ran up stairs, through corridor after corridor!' " So up we started, turning on lights as we went. Silence lay like a pall. Thick, heavy, penetrating silence punctuated only by our footsteps echoing hollowly in that vast barn of a place.

The shadows advanced before us as light after light went on, string by string, corridor by corridor, past suits of armor, past glass inclosed exhibits of stuffed animals and birds, past rows of ancient stone mallets and medieval knives. I nearly jumped out of my skin when I brushed against something and turned to face an exhibit of a Cro-Magnon man, teeth bared, hairy arms hanging below his knees. I wished devoutly I had thought to bring along a revolver. Even the alligator letter opener reposing on my desk at home would have helped bolster my waning courage.

Then we saw it. Down at the end of a corridor on the third level,

a dark huddle on the floor, and, as we ran toward it, I could distinguish a darker stain spreading outward like a fan under the feet of a wax figure, one in a group of eight. The funeral cortege!

WHY go into gory details? It was Stevenson, of course, and there was a great gnawed-looking place in his neck, and he was quite dead.

I picked up the shattered torch and turned it over in my hands, dumbly. Blatz knelt down and felt Stevenson's pulse. Kneeling there he raised his head and sniffed the air.

"Smell it," he said.

I, too, sniffed. There was a faint breath of odor that brought back to me vividly a scene of my boyhood. I was walking railroad ties, a lard pail full of huckleberries in my hand, when I had come upon a dead cat lying half in, half out, of some bushes. It was July, and the cat had been dead about a week. The odor of corruption. It was there in the corridor, and underneath it was another scent, as of burning matches. Sulphur.

"Let's get out of here," I said.

Blatz arose and dusted off his knees. "We can do nothing," he said simply.

The coroner made a statement—death by misadventure.

The officials of the museum put rat killer down, because how else the hole in the neck, and hadn't they found a rat dead in a corner of the Egyptian room with evidences of foam on its whiskers? The foam—or what was left of it after twenty-four hours—had stumped them momentarily, and they had rushed it to a laboratory to see if it had plague or some such. It didn't, of course. Technicians don't recognize the symptoms of being scared to death. If they did, they wouldn't be technicians.

Swanson, the caretaker, said: "I didn't think that young feller would make a good night watchman. Spooky, he was. Acted like he was expectin' suthin'. Sorry he got hisself kilt. Gangsters, I think 'twas. Even if the doors was locked on the inside, they could've hid some'eres."

The papers carried a small item about it, not playing up the wound angle. "Scion of an old family. . . . Last living heir. . . . Estate to be divided among distant cousins. . . . Acting as temporary night watchman in Aldige museum. . . . Apparently, young Stevenson was collecting material for a book. . . . Dr. Blatz, well-known physician, said death probably caused by heart failure."

"Of course it was caused by heart failure," Blatz said to me later, pulling his beard. "If his heart hadn't failed, he wouldn't be dead, would he? It's much more sensible to believe that only Sinbad the Sailor was ever ridden by an evil jinni."

I am in Nassau. The sky is very blue, and the beach is shining, and the surf is like a million Sealyham puppies with eyes covered by frothy hair scrambling in to the shore.

Madeline is ankle deep in the swirling foam, like a dryad or a sea nymph in a dripping moss-green suit, looking for periwinkle shells.

Everything seems far away and when I listen to the pounding of the breakers and the *slap-slap-slap* as they suck at the pilings, I think that after a while this feeling of having lost my way in a cavern of bats will pass and, once again, I can think of my experience as "Bill's dream."

Madeline's philosophy is quite simple. " 'The time has come,' the walrus said, 'to speak of other things, of sailing ships, and sealing wax, and cabbages, and kings.' "

FISHERMAN'S LUCK

by FRANK BELKNAP LONG

● He had a remarkable fishing rod. It always caught something—a murdered man's head—a woman dead the better part of a century——

Illustrated by R. Isip

Hermes—Divine messenger of the gods, identified by the Romans with Mercury. He was worshiped as a conductor of souls and of dreams. His staff was thought to possess magical properties, drawing treasures from the earth and summoning spirits from afar.

Crabb's English Dictionary.

MASON was extremely proud of the fishing rod. It was slim and willowy, and as light as a zephyr. Mason liked to fish, but for five years no one had seriously considered his likes and dislikes. He was just good old Mason, a pillar of the community, and a fixture at Green & Hedges, where he was as indispensable as the business cycle chart on the wall of Green's office.

Green and the chart had kept him glued to his desk for five years. He could hear Green saying it now: "I'm sorry, Mason, but there will be no vacation for you *this* year. Just look at that chart. If conditions get any worse we'll have to cut expenses to the bone."

Without lifting a finger Green had saved the lives of two thousand trout. But Green wasn't a conservationist now. Standing beside Green's widow, Mason had watched them lower the cold clay that had been Green six feet into the ground. She had wept and he had comforted her, a faithful employee to the last.

He was free to fish now. Hedges had steadfastly refused to take down the chart, but Green's widow was not one to be dictated to.

"You'll do as I say, Mr. Hedges. Poor Mr. Mason gets a vacation this year. He's done more for the concern than you."

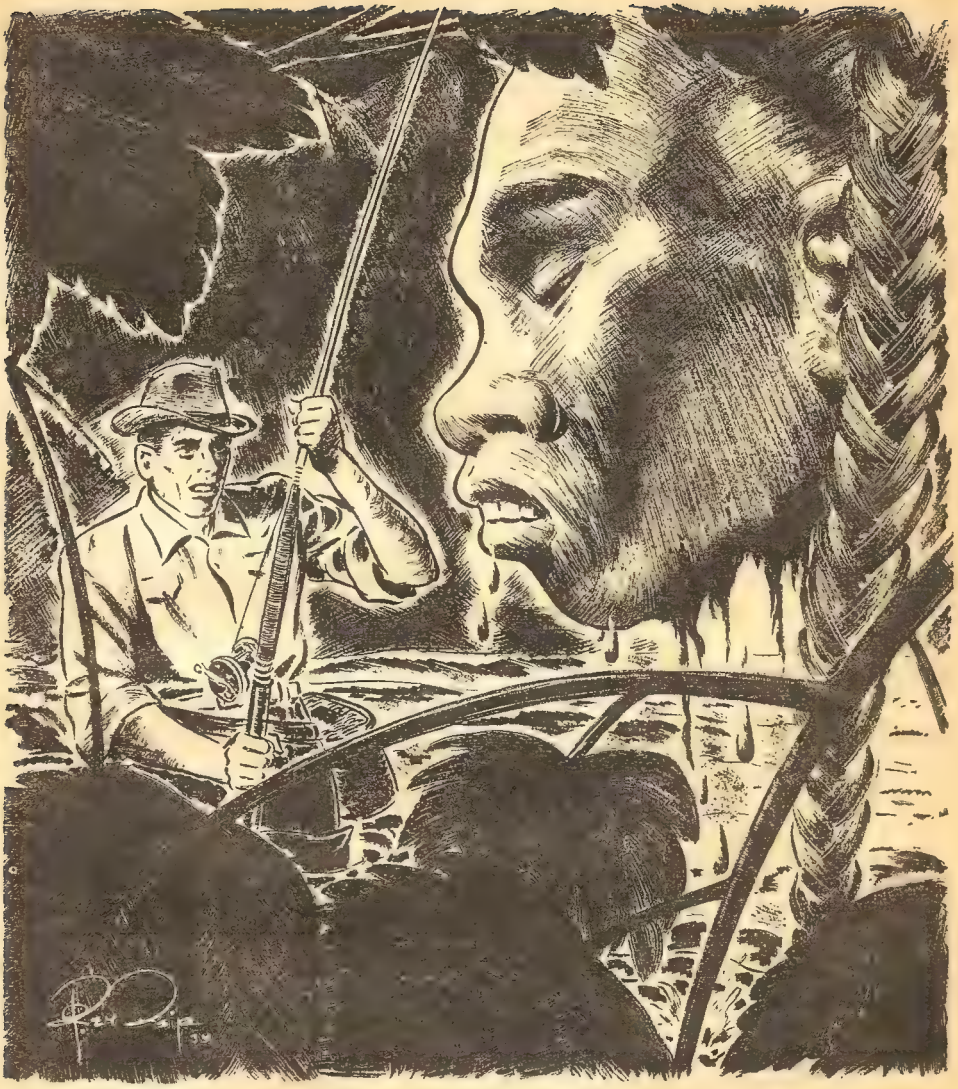
It was true, of course. Mason had done a great deal for the concern. Even if Hedges didn't think so, even if Mrs. Green had to take up the cudgels in his behalf.

The brook in which he was standing was alive with trout. He was standing immersed to his knees, his tall rubber boots arising like ebon pillars from the racing water. He raised his rod and flicked a golden, spun-silk fly gracefully out over the stream, bracing himself as he did so.

He had bought the rod in New York City. Walking down Maiden Lane he had espied it in a pawnbroker's window and had purchased it swiftly on impulse. He could still hear the clerk saying: "Yeah, it's a swell rod. Light as a feather. You couldn't buy a rod like that new for less than thirty bucks."

The fly alighted on a churning eddy and was carried swiftly downstream. He watched it pass from view behind a bend in the bank, his eyes squinting against the sun. Just around that bend was a deep, dark pool overhung with heavy foliage.

Something was tugging on his line. The pull was leaden, but in-



sistent. It was the exact opposite of what he had hoped for. No sudden, violent jerk, but simply a dull resistance at the end of his line, as though he had ensnared a dead log in the depths of the pool.

His rod bent, quivered. He moved out into the center of the stream, holding his net in readiness. Slowly he began reeling the line in.

He saw it before it bobbed around the bend and swirled toward him on the surface of the water. The foliage thinned a little at the extremity of the pool and he caught a sudden glimpse of it between green leaves.

He became ill instantly. Sweat poured out over his body and his stomach twisted in horror. For a merciful instant the foliage hid it from view. Then it bobbed around the bend and he saw it clearly.

Swirling toward him through the dark water was a sallow human face,

oriental in cast, with high cheek-bones and a tightly knotted queue that sickened Mason quite as much as the filaments of mutilated flesh that clung to it. The queue was long, black and twisted and it writhed like a fresh-water eel, churning up the water behind the horror as Mason reeled it in. The filaments merely dangled, like maimed angleworms.

With violently shaking hands Mason unhooked the gruesome relic, and dropped it into his creel. He clamped the lid down, stood trembling. His body now was drenched with sweat. Murder? It was murder, of course. Someone had decapitated a Chinaman and dropped the head into—wait, wait. There was a sawmill somewhere in the vicinity. An industrial accident could not be ruled out.

Mason was sure of only one thing. He had stumbled on something ghastly which he must report at once. The sheriff of the township would know what steps to take.

WHITE to the lips, he returned through the woods to the inn where he had spent the previous night. The long bar just off the main dining room was crowded with fisherman guests. Toward its mahogany sheen Mason gravitated unsteadily, his heart hammering against his ribs.

"A straight whiskey, please," he said.

The landlord himself was passing them out. He shoved a two-ounce glass in Mason's direction, tilted an amber bottle, and beamed.

"Any luck today, brother?" he inquired.

Mason shook his head, drained his whiskey at a gulp.

"Well now," said the landlord. "That's too bad."

Mason shoved his glass forward. "Another please," he said.

Standing at Mason's elbow was a genial stout man with a red, perspiring face. He tapped Mason's shoulder. "I had the best of luck. Mr. M . . . Mason. Just look there."

He lifted the lid of his creel and showed Mason a bevy of speckled trout reposing on moist moss.

Mason said: "I guess I didn't pick the right spots."

"No? Where did you go, Mr. Mason?"

"I tried the deep pool at Mill Stream," he said.

The stout man chuckled. "No wonder you didn't get a bite. There's a jinx on that spot on account of the Chinaman."

Mason's jaw fell open. He swayed and clutched the bar rail, his shoulders jerking.

"You act surprised, Mr. Mason. How come you didn't hear about the jinx? It's been a standing joke in these parts for years."

"What about the Chinaman?" Mason gasped. "Was . . . was he murdered?"

"That's what the grandpops say. Fifty years ago this place was a virgin wilderness. There was some sort of lumber camp here. The chink did the cooking. He got into a fight with a white man and the white man cut his head off with a butcher's cleaver. Yeah, and dropped it into the Mill Stream. It was never found, they say. The Chinaman is supposed to haunt the stream day and night, looking for his head."

Above the bar was a mounted deer's head. Mason stared up at it, and shivered. He shivered because he saw in lieu of horns a pigtail, standing straight up. The long, lugubrious animal face was chang-

ing before his eyes into the mottled, sallow countenance of a long-dead Oriental.

He shook the terrifying illusion off, and turned from the bar, his features twitching. He went straight upstairs to his room, climbing the creaky wooden steps on automatic feet.

In the privacy of his room with his secret safeguarded by a bolted door and drawn shades he felt a lot more secure immediately. Unstrapping the creel, he lowered it hastily to the floor. Reason kept insisting that it couldn't be the same Chinaman. Even if the Mill Stream had a high lime content such a miracle of preservation could not occur in nature.

An uneasy feeling was deepening in him that once he got into the law's clutches his goose would be cooked. They would say that he had heard about the jinx, brooded over it and gone stark, raving mad, killing another Chinaman to enhance the legend's luster.

It was curious, but despite the terrible dread which enveloped him a triviality kept plucking at his nerves. He had a ritual to perform which could not be postponed. Shaking off horror, he picked up his fishing pole and carried it to the window. He raised the sash and leaned out, squinting into the sunset. Down below was a sprawling apple orchard enveloped in purple shadows, its outermost fringe of trees encroaching on the inn's lawn.

EVERY CALLING has its sacred obligations, its solemn rites. The fisherman who neglects to dry out his line loses caste, sinking in his own estimation and affronting Aquarius himself.

Mason had no intention of backsliding in that respect. The nearest of the apple trees had low-hanging limbs, which were exactly suited to his purpose. First he'd fasten a lead sinker to the end of his line and let it descend to the ground beneath his window. Then he'd go down and pick it up, and drape it around the apple tree. That way, the line would dry out high in the air and his reel wouldn't rust.

He didn't remove the fly, merely attached the sinker to the leader gut and thrust his pole out of the window. For the next ten seconds he seemed to be fishing from the window. There was no water down below. Merely earth, grass and buttercups. But a curious expectancy crept over him as the weighted line descended.

It was the queerest sensation. He did seem to be fishing. And the tug was so imperceptible at first, that it blended with his mood, strengthening the illusion.

He awoke to terror suddenly. There was a convulsive jerk and the pole was nearly wrenched from his grasp. With a startled cry, he clamped his thumb on the reel, leaping back into the room. Instantly the tugging became convulsive, continuous. He had all he could do to hold on to the rod. He started to return to the window, then thought better of it.

If he was not to lose his pole, he needed elbow room. Why was he trembling so? There was nothing terrifying about his catch this time. It was either a sheep or a cow which had accidentally ensnared itself, and was now running out his line, plunging frantically away across the orchard.

Of a sudden, the line stopped unwinding. Scarcely daring to breathe, he began reeling it in. To his amazement, there was only a dull, leaden resistance now. For an instant his spine congealed and he envisaged an-

other head, sinister, leering. But it wasn't another head that climbed up over the sill and descended lightly at his feet.

"You've nearly pulled my hair out," his catch said. "I struggled because you took me by surprise. I knew you would catch me some day. They said I went into the woods and disappeared. Perhaps I did. I was lost for hours and I could never remember what happened to me really."

She stood smilingly regarding him, her hair a shimmering golden glory. Her hair wasn't the only glorious thing about her. From her small feet to the crown of her head, she was miraculously endowed physically. She seemed to have stepped right out of an old daguerreotype. She was wearing hooped skirts, and a black satin bodice with flaring sleeves, and her waist tapered to a wasplike slimnes. She was trying to get the hook out of her hair.

"It hurts when I tug at it," she complained. "Can't you do something?"

With trembling fingers he untangled the hook, staring into her sapphire-blue eyes and feeling a sudden warmth rising through him. Her full red lips were smiling at him invitingly.

"I must have fallen asleep in the woods," she said. "I dreamt about you. You caught me and tugged, and I passed from my world into yours."

He was beginning to understand now. A suspicion of the truth was tugging at him as relentlessly as the horror had tugged in the dark, swirling Mill Stream. The horror in his creel. He had forgotten about the horror, but now it swept in upon him again, chilling him, driving the warmth from his body.

He stepped back from her, his lips twitching. "Tell me," he said hoarsely. "When were you born?"

"In 1801," she said. "I am nineteen years old."

So now he knew. It was a magic rod. You fished with it, and caught people who had lived long ago. You caught *things*, too—soggy, dead things. He moaned, and pressed wet palms to his brow.

"We are living in a dream, aren't we?" the girl said. "The things you showed me were certainly unreal. A box with a human voice coming out of it—a woman's musical voice. You said the voice came from a real woman far away. You called it a *radio* voice. And the iron carriage we drove in was certainly something we dreamed about together."

Despite his agitation, it was borne in on him that she possessed a curious sort of foreknowledge. He had caught a girl who could look ahead into her own future. She remembered obscurely, the blank in her life when she had been snatched up out of the past.

A sudden trembling seized him. It was about to happen again. It had to happen. You couldn't change the future when it backwashed into the past like that. She had spoken of an iron carriage. That would be a train, of course.

They were about to go away together. She had traveled about with him in a "dream" long ago, and then returned into the past. He could feel the future plucking at him, planting his feet in the path he was destined to follow.

A strange giddiness was sweeping over him. He wanted to take her in his arms. There was no reason why he shouldn't. He was heart-free, and she was so lovely, so very lovely.

He paled suddenly, remembering the horror in his creel. He couldn't

just leave the head here in his room. Someone would find it and raise a hue and cry. He'd have to take it with him.

She perceived how pale he was, and drew near to him. Her fingers caressed his cheeks, his hair.

"I knew the dream would come again," she said.

They didn't leave together. She slipped down the stairs ahead of him, crouched in shadows at the foot of the banisters and waited for the desk clerk to turn his back. The instant he did so, she darted wasplike, across the lobby, and out through a side door to the veranda of the hotel.

When Mason rejoined her, her hair was blowing in the wind and she was gazing up at the evening star. In the cool, scented dusk he clasped her slender body and kissed her lingeringly, his burden of horror forgotten.

"If we hurry, we can catch the 7:15 train," he said.

He was wearing the creel under his coat, but he said nothing to her about that as they trudged in silence, along a narrow dirt road with the twilight deepening about them.

They caught the train just as it was pulling out. He lifted her to the end platform, swung his bags up, and leaped aboard himself, the creel dangling from his hip.

Whether a man's personality can be split into divergent halves, one recognizably himself, the other a quivering bundle of terror and misery, is a problem difficult to decide. Certainly, the Mason who sat in a deserted smoking car ten minutes later with the creel on his lap, was curiously unlike the Mason who had walked in the dusk with a girl from the past.

He had left her in the observation car, her hands clutching plush. He could still hear her pleading with him. "Don't go away. I fear this part of the dream. I fear it."

He had been reluctant to leave her, even for a moment. But he couldn't bear the thought of her and *it* together, on the same train.

The car was traveling beside a lake which reflected far, glimmering stars. The window beside him was wide open and he could smell the water, and the pines which fringed the lake, and wood smoke arising from the depths of the pines. It was very peaceful out there beyond the window of the car.

He opened the creel suddenly, thrust his hand in. The flesh of the horror was cold to his touch. Sweat broke out on him as his fingers explored its soggy contours. Utter terror seized him. He had the feeling that his heart was about to burst in his chest.

He must steel himself. He must. He could not take her in his arms while this grisly thing stood between them. How should he lift it out? Slip his fingers into the eye sockets, as though it were a bowling ball that he must heft and throw? Or grasp the dank pigtail—

The head seemed to twist about when his fingers plucked at it. He lifted it from the creel without looking at it. Grasping it firmly, he leaned from the window and hurled it straight out into the night.

The train was roaring around a bend, its long bulk twisting like a fire-breathing dragon. He saw the head go sailing out over the lake, saw it descend in a red flare from the cinder-belching locomotive.

He withdrew his head and shoulders quickly. He was trembling uncontrollably. He whipped out a handkerchief, mopped his damp brow. Thank Heaven, it was gone

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from him. It was no longer an incubus weighing him down.

He placed the empty creel on the seat beside him, and fumbled for a cigarette. His heart would stop hammering in a moment.

He didn't see it hovering just outside the window, its pigtail standing straight up, its dead, filmy eyes staring sightlessly in at him. But when it bobbed erratically over the sill, slithered across the seat and plopped back into the creel again, his pupils dilated and a scream strangled back in his throat.

The lake had refused to accept it, and it had returned to roost. It was sometime before he could shake off a convulsive trembling which threatened to hurl him into the aisle.

PERHAPS it *was* a dream. From the very beginning. Had he really left Green & Hedges, traveled to the Catskills, fished in the Mill Stream and returned to New York again?

A dream? He pinched his flesh and stared down at the luggage which he had brought into the restaurant with him. Very substantial his bags looked—as substantial as the creel which now resposed on a chair between the girl and himself.

She was sipping her coffee and smiling at him like an innocent child. She did not know that they were not alone at the table. The straw creel seemed to become translucent suddenly. He saw the dank pigtail, coiled now around the soggy cheeks, the mottled flesh over the horror's cheekbones.

Opposite them a radio was blaring. The woman's musical voice that she had heard in her dream, had given place to raucous swing now.

Mason gasped suddenly. A familiar figure had entered the restaurant and was advancing toward his table.

Green's widow was a statuesque, blond virago past her first youth,

but despite the waning of her beauty, there was something about her which stirred the pulses of most males. Dressed now in red, her Amazonian charms heightened by rouge and a low-cut evening gown, she was the recipient of admiring glances as she advanced between the tables.

Her expression showed that she was furious. The fact that Mason had spurned the vacation she had won for him, returning unexpectedly, with a younger and more attractive woman, was cruelly disillusioning. It made her feel degraded, it made her want to kill him.

She was hovering now directly before his table, glaring down at him.

"When did you get back?" she rasped. "And who is this young lady, may I ask?"

Mason's reaction was one of consternation. Although he had recommended the restaurant to Rhoda Green, he had never dreamed she would drop in for a snack in the small hours to find him dining with a young lady who was a complete stranger to her.

"Rhoda, I . . . I caught cold up there in the mountains," he stammered. "I felt so miserable, I decided not to remain."

Her gaze was withering. "So you've been to a costume party!"

"A costume party? I don't understand."

"Isn't this young lady wearing a costume? Don't tell me she was born in that dress."

The girl beside Mason stiffened. "My mother made this dress," she said. "I resent your slurs, madam."

Rhoda Green's face flamed scarlet. "Oh, you do, do you? Why, you little minx! You cheap little offspring of a minx!"

Furiously, she stooped and slapped the girl's face.

Mason leaped up in consternation, gripped her wrist and twisted her around. "Rhoda, control yourself. That was shameful."

Rhoda seemed to become insane suddenly. She jerked her arm free, and snatched up Mason's creel. The hideous creel, the creel which cloaked all horror.

"*Your* costume, no doubt," she shrilled. "Stuffed in here. Did you go in the rôle of a harlequin?"

She opened the creel before Mason could snatch it from her. Opened it, and screamed. The next instant, she was groping dizzily with her free hand in the air behind her. She must sit down, must find a chair. There was certainly a chair somewhere behind her. She was still waving her hand about when her senses left her, and she crashed to the floor in a dead faint.

No one troubled to keep Mason and the girl apart during the chilling drive from the restaurant to police headquarters. They sat side by side, in a Black Maria, Mason's arm about the girl's slim waist.

"You see how it is, Abigail," he said. "It wasn't a dream. This happened to you before. It didn't happen to me exactly, because I wasn't born when you came from the past into *now*, and met me."

"What will happen to us, dear?"

Mason's face was grim. "I'm afraid the police will be very brutal," he said. "They don't believe in magic. The third degree is—but you wouldn't know about that. It was before your time."

"You mean, they'll torture you?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm afraid they will."

They did. For six hours Mason sat in his shirt sleeves, his forehead beaded with sweat, his eyes drained dry in their sockets. The dazzle was

frightful. If only they would take the blazing light away.

He had wanted a cigarette at first; now water was all he cared about. A glass of cold water bubbling, brimming—a cold spring bubbling.

They kept asking him why. "Why did you kill him? You killed him down in Chinktown, eh? Who was he? What was his name? Where's the rest of him? Why did you butcher him? C'mon, buddy, tell us why."

Mason's chief interrogator was a big, heavy-set man with steel-gray eyes which bulged toward Mason in blind hatred, as though resentful of the speechlessness which was keeping a first-grade detective on his calluses, all night.

"Speak up, buddy. Why did you kill him?"

The door of the tank room was opening slowly. Mason's interrogator wheeled about and stared angrily, a red flush suffusing his cheeks.

"Hey, you," he bellowed. "Shut that door. Keep the hell out of here."

The door continued to swing open. Into the room stepped a white-faced harness cop, his body wobbling about his knees.

"It's orders, MacGregor," he croaked plaintively. "The inspector says you got to stop working on him."

The big man's face became apoplectic. "You mean to say, I gotta quit right when he's getting ready to spill everything?"

The harness bull nodded. "That's right. We ain't got the chink, so we can't hold him."

"You mean we ain't got the body?"

"It's the head I'm referrin' to, MacGregor. The girl took it with her when she popped out of sight."

"The girl did *what?*"

"Popped right out of sight. She is sitting by the inspector's desk when she jumps up, grabs the basket which has the chink in it, and says: 'Tell him I'll always love him. Tell him I'm waking up *back there.* Tell him I'm taking this horrible thing with me. Back where it came from.

"She starts running then. The inspector jumps up and leaps around in front of her. He thinks she is heading for the door, but she ain't at all. Right in front of the inspector's desk there is a flash of light, and she is gone.

"Huh, you should have seen the inspector's face. I try not to let my feelings show. But just between us, MacGregor, I'm as startled as the inspector. Yeah, and twice as scared. The basket keeps right on moving. It sails across the room and out through the door.

"The inspector lets out a yell and dashes out into the corridor after it. I just stand there shivering, too scared to move a muscle. The inspector is gone for maybe ten seconds. When he comes back he has the basket, all right, but the chink is no longer in it.

"'Kelly,' he says, 'go down to the tank room and tell MacGregor to lay off. We've been the victims of a mass Hal Lucy Nation.' That's what he said—Hal Lucy Nation. Who the hell is that guy, MacGregor?"

MacGregor didn't reply. He was staring down at Mason, who had slipped from his chair and was lying stretched out on the floor, his shoulders heaving in the dazzle light.

Mason's sobs were heart-rending. But it wasn't Mason's sobs which

gave MacGregor a turn. It was the *other* guy.

A tall guy wearing white shorts, and sandals with little branching wings on them. He was bending over Mason, a long, crooked cane in his hand. He was speaking softly, his voice like a whisper from the grave. "You'll get over it," he was saying. Time softens grief, you know. I'm sorry you had to pick up my staff, and catch that girl with it."

He smiled a trifle shamefacedly. "Unfortunately, I've a prankish side to my nature. When I was a newborn babe I stole the cows of Apollo and released them on the dark side of the Moon. It gave my parents a jolt, I can tell you. Since then I've amused myself by playing practical jokes on the human race.

"I know it's shameful, but my staff is a constant temptation in that respect. I can change it so easily into a snake, a divining rod, an umbrella —anything retaining the general proportions of a staff."

His voice deepened slightly. "This time I transformed it into a fishing rod and gave it to a tramp to pawn. I thought: The pawnbroker will put it in his window and a fisherman will buy it. What a jolt he will get!

"You see, I can always recover the staff again. I have merely to summon it, and it leaps into my hand from wherever it happens to be in the world. And when it has performed an act of magic, I know . . . I know all the details."

MacGregor was recovering from his surprise. He thrust out his jaw and glared at the stooping figure, his face crimson. "You!" he bellowed. "Who let you in here? Who said you could talk to the prisoner?"

The stooping figure arose. "I must go now. Conversing with mortals is a constant strain. Nowadays, in their blind ignorance, they deny the very existence of the gods. I came simply to beg your forgiveness. I intended to play a practical joke; not a cruel one. I could bring her back easily enough, but you would be miserable wedded to a woman who died before you were born. Your tastes, your sympathies would be as far apart as the poles."

The stranger's passing was not at all sensational. He simply turned and walked away across the tank room, a faint, whitish cloud swirling up about him. There was a dwindling of bare legs and radiant shoulders, a sudden inrush of empty air. Merely that, and a stillness descending, broken only by MacGregor's harsh breathing, and the continuous sobbing of the man on the floor.

THE FLAYED WOLF

by P. SCHUYLER MILLER

When mankind was still young—werewolves were old, and a deadly, mighty menace!

Illustrated by R. Isip

THE great wolf growled, deep in the earth.

For the space of a dozen breaths the mountain trembled and threw down boulders and trickling scree. The great tilted block that was the

roof of Sur's shelter slipped from its place and crushed Sur and Sur's woman beneath it. A doe bolted out of the forest and stood bewildered a moment before the caves of the wolf folk, staring with great eyes; then with a bound was gone.

There was a hush over the forest. There was no wind, and even the lap and gurgle of the wide water below the caves seemed to have been stilled. Through the silence the people of the wolf could hear the grating snarl of their tribal fetish, trapped under the mountains in the very-long-ago by first man. They felt the gray rock under their feet toss and tremble as the father of wolves strove to break his bonds. Wod, their chief, cried out from his cave and the women came scampering to lay food and fire on the great stone of sacrifice.

As the great wolf raged, all eyes turned to the mouth of Fenra's cave. Fenra was the wolf's voice, through whom the fetish spoke and gave his commands. Fenra was their contact with that world of the unseen which none but the initiate could hope to penetrate. Soon he would come, stooped and shambling, peering with his little black eyes to seek out misdoing and claim the vengeance of the wolf. But the wolf's voice rolled away in a sullen mutter and the wolf's vast body ceased to writhe, and Fenra did not appear.

When the earth shook, Tor was lying flat on his back in a far passage of the caves, scratching with his graver at the slick surface of limestone a few inches above his face. The light of his stone lamp cast quivering shadows over the uneven stone and Tor's eye saw in them the plunging bodies of the mating bison whose outlines he was tracing in the soft stone. The sharp flint bit deep and a white powder fell on his naked chest, tattooed with the intricate symbols of his manhood. Soon now he would retrace his graving with soot and black earth, and make the hunter's magic to bring fertility to the food herds and full bellies to the clan in the long winter.

Tor heard the great wolf growl and lay still, listening. In his mind's eye he could see the shackled body twisting and humping, the coarse hair bristling on the vast brute's spine, the slavering fangs and green eyes blazing with fury at the puny two-legged thing that had trapped the father of wolves by trickery and bound him for all time. He wondered if any man today had ever seen him, somewhere there beyond the last turning of the deepest cave, where first man had left him when he began his climb out of the dark world into the light. If anyone had, it was Fenra.

The lamp beside him flickered suddenly and the pale flame from its wick of twisted moss lay over on its side and thinned to a mere thread of light. Tor dropped his graver and lifted himself on one elbow, cupping his hands about the little tongue of fire. Fire died easily and was hard to bring to life again. He had chosen this corridor because there had been no draft in it to snuff out the feeble light. Under him the rock swayed and tilted, and far away in the heart of the mountain he heard the rolling crash of falling rock. Air whispered past him and the flame went out.

He lay, the hair prickling on his neck, listening in the dark. The air was still again—a moment and it began to flow in the opposite direction, out by the way he had come into the cave of the hunters. Tor turned over suddenly, bumping his head on the low ceiling with a violence that brought dancing sparks before his eyes. With the gentle draft had come

a scent of burning herbs, faint and pungent.

Tor had been born in a cave, somewhere in what would one day be Spain, before the people of the wolf crossed over the cloud-raking ranges of the Pyrenees into the northern land where they now lived. He could sense the nearness of walls and follow unerringly twisting, narrow passages where a man as big as Wod could never have gone. Light was a convenience but not a necessity to him, and now it gave him little concern that his lamp had been blown out. His artist's fingers went to the flint knife tucked in his doeskin clout and he began to creep cautiously in the direction from which the herb smell came.

THE PASSAGE narrowed and grew high beyond the place he had chosen for his gallery. He had explored it briefly before he began to sketch. His mind held a picture of fallen blocks over and under which he must crawl, and he groped his way almost without hesitation through the utter darkness.

Beyond the high place the cave dropped to a single hole into which Tor could barely wedge his shoulders. Here the scent of burning came so strongly to his sensitive nostrils that his eyes watered. He lay for a time listening, but there was no sound from beyond. Inch by inch he pulled himself along on his belly, reaching ahead to explore the floor and walls. Sometimes these narrow cracks opened without warning into bottomless pits where, far below, great waters raged and thundered in the blackness.

He made one turn to the left with difficulty, and found that he must twist on his side to negotiate a second angle to the right. Groping ahead, his fingers found jagged rock —newly broken—where a curtain of stalagmitic growth had fallen away. He pushed the fragments of stone down past his body and edged on over the sharp stump of the stalagmite, only to find that a huge, slanting slab of stone blocked the tunnel completely. And then beyond it he saw light!

It came and went like starshine on rippling water. It was little more than a glow, but as it waxed and waned he could see the outlines of the great slab whose falling had shattered the flowstone curtain and opened the way to whatever lay beyond. There was a slot between it and the wall, through which the light shone; and Tor thought that if he could flatten himself another thumb's breadth he might force his body through.

It was a tight fit. His head went in, and his shoulders, and then he blew out all the air he could from his lungs and squeezed his chest after them. A wriggle, a tug, and he was through, lying in the open corridor with the huge block slanting up over him, the light from beyond shining on its moist surface. He set one foot against it and kicked himself ahead, and with a dull grating the slab slipped down, blocking the hole through which he had come.

A moment's examination convinced him that there was no going back. He must find another exit.

The light had faded almost to nothing. Now it flared up again, brighter than before. At the tunnel's end he could see the black cavity of a huge chamber against whose stone-hung wall the gleam shone wanly. A puff of aromatic smoke was wafted to his nostrils, and he could hear plainly a cracked voice chanting.

A moment later he was looking into the cavern from a hole that opened halfway up its walls. It was

vast, its walls shadow-hung, its roof covered with pendant icicles of stone. Its floor dropped away into the unfathomable darkness of lower levels, but on a narrow ledge at the pit's verge a fire of fatty bones was burning, and over it bent a nightmare figure, warped and evil—Fenra the priest!

Tor's eyes glittered. Fenra! He hated the old man, as did most of his people, but he feared him, too. Fenra could speak with the great wolf and bring his commands to the wolf folk. It was Fenra who had cried the great wolf's anger when the people first began to lose children and old women, before the giant beast which was raiding them grew bold enough to enter their camp in broad daylight and drag away girls old enough for mating and boys with the first hair of manhood on their faces. Tor's mind saw the huge white wolf again, crouched on the stone of sacrifice, its jowls dripping with the blood of the girl-child the folk had given it at Fenra's bidding. In its devil's body, Fenra said, lived the spirit of the great wolf himself, demanding the blood penalty for the sin which had been done against him.

Tapers of rolled tallow had burned low in a circle at the center of which Fenra squatted by his fire. Their aromatic smoke mingled with the smoke of the fire to form a pearly curtain through which it was hard to see. It seemed to grow denser as Fenra's voice mumbled its incantations. The priest was naked, his bony body painted with black and red, his wrinkled face hideously skull-like. A tuft of feathers was tied into his white hair, and a long, keen knife of yellow flint, set in an antler handle, lay before him on the floor.

Beyond the circle of flames the smoke was thickening over the pit. To Tor's watching eyes it seemed that a shape was taking form there, a shadow in the shadows, more tangible than they. His flesh quivered and a chill ran through his blood. There was a rank, bestial scent in the air.

There *was* something in the smoke. He saw its eyes now, long slots of pale fire, and a black head-mass behind them. He saw a body and misshapen limbs that clutched at the pit's edge and drew it upward through the smoke, toward the circle of flame and the waiting priest. Fenra was on all fours by the fire now, staring into those slitted eyes. There was something in front of him, something that twisted and jerked at the rawhide with which it was bound. The fire flared up and Tor saw it plainly—a she-wolf, spread-eagled on the floor.

He could barely see Fenra now, and the thing from the pit. Only its eyes shone through the choking murk, ovals of flickering green fire. Fenra's shrill voice rose in a slow, triumphant chant whose every syllable bit into Tor's brain. With it came a yelp from the helpless wolf as the priest's knife bit into its flesh, flaying the pelt from its living body. Fenra sprang to his feet, swinging the bloody skin above his head. It settled over his scrawny shoulders, the grinning mask falling over his painted face as his chant rose to a final scream. The fire leaped up in a single great tongue, showing the priest on all fours at the ring's edge, the pelt of the flayed wolf drawn close about him—then went out.

Something was there in the blackness of the cave—something inimical, full of hate. Out of the dark the thing's green eyes bored into Tor's, searching him out, fastening on him; yet something in him knew that it could do him no harm, that the

priest's spell had bound it for some purpose of his own and until it was freed he was safe. He knew, too, that Fenra was gone and that the way of escape was clear.

Tor's eyes never left those two slots of green fury above the pit, as he groped his way down to the cavern floor. Embers still glowed red in the circle of snuffed-out candles. A kind of bravado filled him as he sensed the invisible wall that held the thing prisoner. He bent and pinched together a mass of tallow where one of the tapers had guttered on the stone. There was a fragment of wick in it and it would help him to find the way out. But, as he touched it, the enshrouding pall of smoke seemed to gather closer, blotting out the glow of the embers, and close beside him the flayed wolf whimpered and struggled. He drew back and squatted on his haunches, staring into the darkness. Had the green wolf's eyes of the pit-thing drifted closer as he touched the candle?

Cold sweat stood out on Tor's body. This was a magic that he could not understand—a dark magic full of evil. He sprang up and blundered away from the pit, away from the watching eyes, out into the vastness of the lightless cavern. Then his foot touched something warm and wet. He stooped and sniffed. It was blood. Fresh blood dripping from the pelt of the flayed wolf, marking Fenra's trail. He went down on his knees, his nostrils dilated to catch the faint scent. There was another drop, and another.

There were only half a dozen blood drops before the spoor ended, but he had the scent and the direction. The heavy odor of the she-wolf betrayed Fenra's path and Tor soon found a vaulted passage, rising rapidly to a higher level, through which a current of warmer air blew in his face.

THE SCENT led, as he had suspected, to the priest's cave. The place was empty. Cautiously he drew aside the curtain of sewn hides which hung over the cave mouth. Fenra's den was apart from the rest, separated from the tribal shelter by a buttress of weathered stone. A trail ran down through a crevice to the flat place under the stone of sacrifice, where Wod, chief of the wolf folk, said the law.

Looking down the slot in the rock Tor saw that the entire tribe was gathered about Wod's seat. The one-eyed chieftain was speaking, his bull's voice bellowing words which Tor could not hear. And over his hairy shoulder Tor glimpsed the twisted, hump-backed shape of the priest.

"Tor!"

He shrank back against the stone, his hand dropping to the forbidden knife at his waist. Then he saw her, standing in the shadow of the buttress. Her fine brown hair lay in a russet cloud over her golden shoulders. A silver lynx skin was fastened round her slender waist, falling below her knees. Seef was beautiful—far more so to his eyes than the plump and swarthy maidens of his own people. She had been captured as a child by a scouting party which had wandered many moons' journey toward the rising sun, into a land of spacious plains where horses, wild cattle and antelopes fed in vast herds, and Seef's round-headed people dwelt in villages of beehive huts. One day the people of the wolf would take that land of plenty for their own.

Seef's eyes were bright with terror. "Tor," she whispered, "where

have you been? The devil-wolf came again and took Wod's woman, and Lok and Fenra cry that it is your doing—that you have broken the taboo of the five-fingered, and the great wolf demands vengeance. They say that the devil-spirit that he has sent will kill and kill until the wolf folk are wiped out unless you atone for the sacrilege with your life. Tor—is it true?"

A shadow fell over Tor's face. He spread the fingers of his delicate hands—fingers unmutilated by the rites which made a man a warrior or a hunter. He was of the five-fingered clan, the artists and makers of magic, and the law of the wolf barred him from the normal pursuits of manhood.

"I am a man like Lok," he muttered. "I am as strong and swift of foot as he. I can see like the hawk, and read the wind like a wolf. Why should I live like a woman?"

"Tor! It is true, then! You broke the taboo—and the wolf was sent in punishment. Go, quickly, before Wod finds you here!"

"The wolf was not sent!" Tor's eyes flashed. "What I have done is my deed, not the tribe's. If the wolf was brought by any sin it is Fenra's, who calls up demons out of the dark and runs like a fox on all fours!"

"Tor!" The girl's hands tugged at him imploringly. "You broke the law. Lok came bringing a spear and cried that you made it against the taboo, and that you went into the forest with it against the taboo, and that you struck and took blood against the taboo. Lok cried that he saw you kill, and that he wrested the spear from you and brought it at once before Wod to cry your crime. And then Fenra came and looked long at the spear, and made his magic, and the magic said that it was so and that the white wolf had come because of your sin and must be appeased."

"I made the spear. I have killed with it as a man should. But Lok would never dare to take it from me! He stole it while I slept, or while I was making the hunting magic in the caves. He lies that he saw me slay, and Fenra lies with him."

"So Fenra lies!" They spun. The priest stood there, Lok's fiery head behind him, and the great-bodied bulk of Wod. The chief's one eye was grim and his fist was closed savagely around his spear. Behind, crowded into the narrow way, were the men of the tribe.

"Fenra smells out sin!" The priest's bony finger pointed at him. "You have heard from his own lips that he broke the taboo. Lok saw it. My magic saw it. Kill him, men of the wolf!"

Plucking the girl's hands from his shoulders, Tor swung her behind him into the shelter of the priest's cave. The trail was narrow and they could not attack until they reached the space before the cave. Below, the treetops of the forest rose almost to the ledge.

Knife in hand, he stepped into the open. "I defy the taboo!" he cried. "It is no crime to be a man."

Lok was in the forefront of the throng. He was a head taller than Tor, thickset, blue-eyed, with a flaming beard and hair. He was the most skillful and daring of the younger hunters and it was Wod's decree that Seef would be his at the mating moon. A grin curved his lips as he swung his spear shoulder high—and Tor's knife flashed like a live thing through the air and caught him.

Amazement stood on Lok's face as he fell. Before the others could recover, Tor leaped. He plummeted through the branches of a giant hem-

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lock and landed on hands and knees on the ground beneath its sheltering branches. A shower of spears rattled through the green canopy above him, and he heard Seef's cry and Wod's bull-bellied shout of rage. Picking himself up, he disappeared into the black depths of the forest.

FULL-FED, muscled and scarred by three moons' battle with the forest, Tor lay on his belly, half hidden in the ferns, looking down on the deep pool where the maidens of the wolf folk came to bathe. For five days he had lain here, hoping to catch a glimpse of Seef, but no one had come. The sandy beach, where the stream curved out into the wide water below the caves, was bare of footprints.

No man would find him here. The place was taboo to the men of the wolf people, but Tor had scant respect for taboos. Since the day when the warriors of his clan had hunted him into the forests, he had become older and harder. He had seen the snowy summits of the southern ranges shining against the stars, and stood where the bitter waters of the lake-without-an-end battered themselves in flashing spume against the western cliffs. He had fought for his life against the men of the western peoples, battled with the great carnivores of the deep forest. Now, as the mating moon approached, he had returned to the hunting grounds of his own people, hardened, bitter, planning the last act which would bring him death or happiness.

When he left, Seef would come with him.

None of the women of the tribe had come near the pool since he had lain here. That meant that he must creep closer to the caves, out of the protected area. Capture, he knew, meant death without mercy.

He fingered the amulet that swung from a thong about his neck. He had

carved it out of a bit of mammoth tusk during the nights that he lay alone, there in the west, dreaming of Seef. Its shape mimicked the half-seen, monstrous thing that had lain in the blackness of Fenra's cave—blocky, prick-eared, gross, with slits of eyes peering from a formless face and fingered paws outspread. The eyes of the thing had gone out of his dreams when the carving was completed, and the polished ivory had taken on a chill and weight of its own. There was power in it as there was in all images, and somewhere, somehow, he might need that power.

A motion below him brought him to his hands and knees. Something was moving along the path that led to the women's place from the forest beyond. That way were only tumbled crags and deep ravines through which the river foamed and thundered. He had hidden there for a time while the wolf folk hunted him.

A patch of sunlight fell across the trail where it came into the open woods bordering the beach. Tor's breath hissed in as he saw the figure that shambled into the light. Stooped—snouted—covered with lank black hair—it was one of the beast men whom the wolf folk had driven out when first they came from the south. A few of them still lurked in the deeper forests, to be slain like the cannibal beasts they were when a spearman found their spoor. Tor had never seen one, yet here were three, within shouting distance of the caves.

In single file the Neanderthalers crossed the little beach and disappeared in the direction of the caves. They wore tatters of skin clothing and carried stout, pointed shafts of hard wood and keen fist-axes of chipped stone. Their bull necks and thick skulls marked them as formidable adversaries.

His eyes burning, his nostrils dilated, Tor watched. Presently the three returned. Their little eyes searched the forest fringe where he lay before they trotted back along the trail into the upstream gorges. Tor lay like a log. Soon he saw the twitch of a bent bough as one of the creatures crept back to scan their back trail for pursuit. He smiled grimly. Three months of hunting and being hunted had made him too wise to be caught by such simple tricks.

He knew a way that would bring him into the gorge beyond the next bend in the stream. He crouched under a scrubby cedar as they trotted past, barely a spear's cast below him. They were like men, but their legs were short and crooked, their spines curved, their long flat heads set low on their shoulders. They gabbled to each other in a guttural, clucking tongue. The wind was toward him and he caught their fetid odor. He could follow that scent for days if need be.

The sun was down when he came upon their camp. He smelled it before he reached it and circled cautiously before creeping close. A flat space before the mouth of a low cave was littered with bones and other filth. A smoky fire flickered against the base of the huge block which formed one wall of the shelter.

There were six of the beast men and twice as many of their women, with a few squalling brats. The hair rose on Tor's body as he watched them. These were the man-eating ogres of his people's legends, the devil men who had fought their every step in the long march down out of the mountains in the long ago.

Tor's searching eyes found another form, huddled against the cave wall. A child of his own people! It stirred and he saw that it was a girl of

perhaps eleven summers, almost ready to bud into young womanhood. Her legs were lashed together and her hands bound behind her back so that she could only lie like a trussed deer, waiting for what might come.

TOR STUDIED the cave mouth. It was nearly hidden by the masses of vines that draped the cliffside. From the way they fell there should be an overhanging ledge under which he might creep to a point just above her. The beast men were intent on some business of their own around the fire. He rose cautiously to his feet and a moment later was clinging to the vine curtain above the cave.

He had been right. A softer stratum of rock had rotted away, leaving a natural tunnel under the harder ledge above, completely hidden by the tangled mat of vines. When he could go no farther he was less than thrice a man's height from the ground and directly above the cave. With his knife he cautiously cut away the vines. The Neanderthalers were huddled around an old, grizzled crone who was making cabalistic marks in the soil with a whittled thighbone. Working swiftly, he loosened the rawhide thong which he wore around his waist and knotted a loop in its end. It should just reach. A moment later the thong snaked down over the cliff face and dangled beside the bound girl. His eyes narrowed in approval as he saw her inching toward it.

Little by little the loop was pulled up over her body until it was fast under her arms. Tor jammed his shoulders against the ledge and began to pull the rope in. When he saw that the group around the fire were oblivious to what was happening, he hauled faster, and presently the child's slim body was lying beside his under the ledge.

The moonlight shone on her face as he parted the leafy curtain which hid them. It was Fray, child of Wod's favorite mate. Tor's lips pressed tight as he saw the open zigzag wound on her forehead. Thus Fenra marked his sacrifices to the wolf demon! The girl's eyes were searching his face, black with fear. She knew him, of course—the renegade, the accursed, who had brought the vengeance of the devil wolf down on their clan and caused her own sacrifice. He brought his lips close to her ear.

"Listen," he hissed, "and be still. I am Tor. I will kill you as gladly as those beasts below us if need be, but if you tell me the things I must know you will go free. My knife is here at your throat, and besides the beast men will eat us both if you cry out. Now—where is Seef?"

The child's body was trembling against his side as she answered. "Seef will die tonight when the moon has climbed to the top of the sky. It is the mating moon and Fenra says she must be the bride of the great wolf. He says that, because you escaped, the curse will follow us until the white wolf has had his fill of blood. Then we must go away, to some other place where it cannot find us."

"You were given to the wolf. How did you come here?"

She shuddered under his arm. "I . . . I don't know. They gave me the stuff of sleep, and when I woke I was in this cave. Lees was here, too, but they took her away when the wolf came. I . . . I think they ate her."

"The wolf? You saw the wolf?"

Fray nodded. "It came in the last sleep. I have been here for five sleeps now. It was huge and shining, with green eyes and teeth that dripped

fire, and there were black wolves with it. The women came and took Lees away, and there were noises—like beasts gnawing on a bone. My soul went out of me then," she added tearfully. "When it returned the women beat me, and one of them flung me a bone with some meat on it. I . . . I didn't eat it. I was afraid it might be Lees."

"*Shhh!*" Tor realized suddenly that the mumble of the beast men had ceased. His arm tightened protectingly about the girl's shoulders

"Quiet—and listen!" he snapped. "I'll free you now—and you must take back a message—quickly!

as he parted the vines. She was as much an outcast as he, marked as she was for the sacrifice.

The fire was being built up with bones and scraps of dry wood. The women had withdrawn into the cave mouth, all but the old hag who capered noiselessly in the circle of the firelight. A pile of pelts was before her on the ground. Grouped in a half-circle at the edge of the shadows the six beast men watched her.

The mad dance went on. The crone was like a shadow of evil, flitting across the face of the fire, her skinny arms jerking and twisting, her hairy face thrust out. Suddenly she sprang into the air and came down crouching, one skinny arm pointing. Tor felt the girl shrink under his arm. At the forest's edge stood the devil wolf.

It was huge—as big as a man. Its fur was ashen in the moonlight—its eyes cold-green like the slit eyes of the thing he had seen in the cave. It stood, head down, watching the beast men, phosphorescent froth dripping from its jaws.

THE HAG was on all fours in the waning firelight. A wolf pelt was wrapped around her and her withered face peered out from under its dead mask. One by one the beast-men took the pelts from her and flung them over their hairy shoulders, as the hag began to chant in harsh, bold, cackling words that Tor knew!

In a breath it had happened. The wolf masks seemed to slip down over the brutal faces. Crooked arms and legs bent oddly. Barrel bodies narrowed. One by one six black he-wolves, led by a huge black she-wolf, trotted into the night to meet the white wolf demon.

The blood pounded in Tor's temples. Tonight—now—was the sacrifice. Seef would be laid on the great rock, before the caves of her people, pegged out with grass ropes. Fenra would be crouching over her, his evil old eyes gloating over her, and as the moon climbed higher he would pry her jaws open and pour down her throat the bitter sleep-draft which would guarantee her acceptance by the spirit of the great wolf.

But it was not the great wolf who had sent the demon beast. Tor knew that now. This was black magic of the beast folk—insatiable, bestial magic which would not end until the people of the wolf were gone. Or until it had been defeated by magic stronger than itself!

His fingers tightened on the amulet at his throat. His hand sought the wrist of the slight figure beside him. "Fray," he whispered, "you and I have seen the truth of this thing which comes against the folk. We must fight it. Will you go and tell Wod what you have seen?"

She shrank away from him. "Alone?" she quavered. "Out there—with them?"

"I will be with you soon," he reassured her. "There is something I must do. Then I will meet you on top of the cliff, under the great pine. Take my knife if you are afraid. We will reach the caves before them, I think, and you must help me to save Seef when the wolf comes."

When she was gone he picked up his spear and lowered himself over the cliffside. The females were in the cave, but when he dropped beside the dying fire one of them saw him. She screeched like a wild cat and came running at him; and with a snarl he drove his spear through her body, dragged it out and strode grimly into the cave.

When they were all dead, he wiped his spear on the filthy furs they used for beds and went to look for Fray

on top of the cliff. She was where he had sent her, back to the bole of the great pine, his knife gripped in a white-knuckled fist.

She was like a fawn in the forest. She ran beside him like a speeding shadow, without speaking. They followed a way that led across the high shoulder of the mountain, straight to the caves. And as he ran he felt the amulet like a lump of ice against his throat, burning cold and heavy as paint stone.

The moon was high when they reached the summit of the cliff above the caves. Ordinarily, there was a lookout here, but now the entire clan was gathered around the stone of sacrifice. Side by side, the man and child peered down through the night. Great leaping fires illuminated the place of meeting. Wod's figure towered above the heads of the wolf folk, sitting on his chief's seat. Tor drew in his breath as he saw Seef's white form stumbling along between two women, and the man who stood waiting beside the great, dark-stained stone.

Not Fenra—Lok!

The man was changed. As he moved to meet the sacrificial procession Tor saw that one leg dragged behind him. Tor's flung knife, biting into his thigh joint, had crippled him hopelessly. No cripple might kill game for the wolf folk. It was taboo.

His big hand closed over the child's fingers. "It is too late," he told her. "We must take her from them. Will you run to Wod and cry what you have seen—give me a chance to reach Seef and cut her free?"

Her eyes searched his face in the moonlight. She was fast becoming a woman, this little Fray. She nodded, wordlessly.

There was a crooked way down the cliff from the sentinel's place. Tor crouched in a shadowed crevice while Fray clambered down. It might be death that awaited her. She had been chosen for death, and taken, and the dead must not return. He loosened the knife in his breechclout and settled his grip on the two spears he carried.

The wolf folk had drawn back almost to the mouth of the communal cave. Wod stood a pace or two before them as befitted a chief, and Lok, his red beard like clotted blood in the firelight, stooped over the stone of sacrifice, tightening the ropes that stretched Seef's body across its blackened surface. He rose, gripping an oaken staff, and a hideous cry broke from his lips just as Fray burst into the open and flung herself at the chieftain's feet.

High above them, Tor heard the murmur that rose from the clan. Fray—taken by the devil wolf—returned! Lok was hobbling across the open space, his face twisted, hauling his crippled body along with the aid of his staff. Wod's single burning eye was fixed on the tear-streaked face of the girl-child he had given to the great wolf. Rock trickled under Tor's feet as he launched himself down the steep slope, but none heard him. Spear raised, he raced into the firelight at the moment that the ghostly shape of the white wolf sprang to the summit of the rock and stood with lowered head and dripping fangs over the helpless girl.

Tor's spear sang past the white wolf's head. The great beast sprang aside and slipped from the rock. Another shape appeared beside it, and another—seven black wolf-things waiting his attack. With a shout Lok lurched into Tor's path, swinging his

oaken stave high, but the exile caught the other's wrist in his hand and drove his second spear through the redbeard's knotted throat. He wrenched at the spear to free it. There was a snap and the flint head broke away. With a snarl he snatched up the dead man's staff and vaulted over the pack's heads to the summit of the rock of sacrifice.

Like wheeling bats, the wolves were circling around the stone, hemming him in. Flank to flank stood their devil leaders, white and black-green slit eyes watching craftily for his first false move.

"Tor!" Seef's white face looked up at him. He stooped to cut the thongs that bound her, and as he did the first wolf sprang.

Tor's flint blade plunged deep in the black beast's throat and carried it, kicking, over his head. He straightened and his staff caught the second beast beside the head, stretching it out with its bared fangs against Seef's shoulder. He swung again and the staff broke over the third wolf's back and left him with a two-foot stub of oak in his hand.

The sinister ring drew back. Two he had slain, one lay with a broken back beneath the stone. He watched the remaining three circling warily and saw the black she-wolf slip forward and go from one to the other, touching muzzles with them. Her mouth lolled open in a fiendish grin; her green eyes studied him. But the white devil wolf still sat quietly at the forest's edge, waiting.

There was a patter of naked feet behind him. He spun. Fray stood by the rock, Wod's great spear in her hand, reaching it toward him. He stooped and snatched her to his side as the wolves closed in. And as he straightened to meet the attack his own eyes narrowed, for where a wolf had lain at his feet with cracked skull was the body of a beast man.

Fray had a knife and was hacking at Seef's bonds. As they saw the spear in his hand, the wolves swerved and came in from both sides. He raised the weapon and hurled it with all his strength at the giant she-wolf. It struck her behind the shoulder and the point stood out of her side, dripping blood, as she somersaulted backward and lay kicking.

A shadow leaped at him from the left. He turned to meet it and the amulet swung out on its thong. The ivory image struck the springing wolf across the muzzle. He felt its hot breath on his cheek and then it reeled in midair and fell kicking to the ground. A burnt streak showed under its eye where the amulet had hit.

Then the last two monsters were on the rock, standing shoulder to shoulder, their heads low, their ears laid back, with something very like fear in their eyes. With a shout he sprang at them and they swerved aside. The forest swallowed them and Tor stood alone on the rock of sacrifice, straddling Seef's body and the child's, staring into the cold eyes of the devil beast which stood watching him a scant three paces away.

Cold fire burned on his breast. His fingers went to the amulet and lifted it. The ivory glowed with greenish light; the carved eye slits were spots of emerald fire. The white wolf saw it and its grinning jaws snapped shut. It turned and vanished in the darkness.

Tor's fingers were tight around the amulet in a grip that he could not loosen. The chill from it crept up his arm, to the elbow, to the shoulder. A tingling fire seemed to

follow the cold. A mist was gathering about him, dank and black, and through it he could see two green slit eyes and a vast black shape.

Fray's knife lay on the rock at his feet. He picked it up and went to where the maimed wolf lay snarling with fear. With swift, deft motions he flayed the skin from its quivering body. The raw flesh twitched as the air struck it, and the wolf screamed like a man in pain. But Tor was muttering strange, meaningless sounds—sounds that seemed to flood of their own accord out of his brain. He shouted the last word as he lifted the bloody pelt and swung it over his head. The knife dropped from his fingers. The dripping wolfskin seemed to fasten itself about him. He dropped on all fours and felt his arms and legs twisting and gathering under him. His head turned up and forward to stare through the black mist at those two green eyes that, as he looked, faded and disappeared. He took one step forward, and another, and new scents came flooding in on him, new sounds.

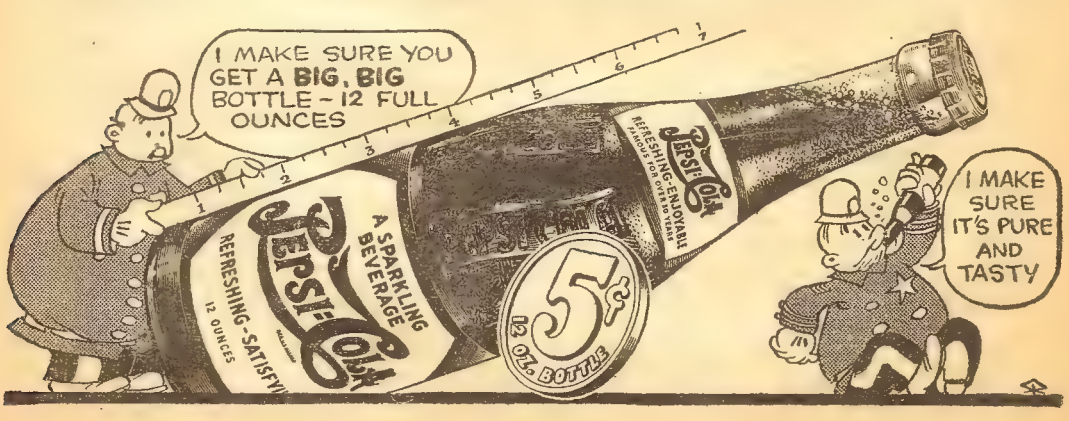
He was a wolf.

From the rock Seef's face and Fray's stared at him in horror. He spun on his haunches and saw Wod and the people of the wolf gaping at him across Lok's dead body, across the sprawling forms of the dead beast men—the men who had been wolves.

He was a wolf. The flayed pelt he had flung across his shoulders as he cried the old priest's spell had knitted itself to him. His fingers and toes had drawn together, his joints bent at new angles, his face pushed out into a hairy muzzle. Man scent was all around him, and the sweet odor of warm blood, and the cold scent of death. And with them was a musty, bestial scent that tickled a dim memory in his beast's brain.

He was a wolf, and he was going to kill. His nose went to the rock where the white wolf had crouched and he drank in the monster's scent. His muzzle swung to the bright full moon riding in the zenith and he gave tongue in a savage howl. Then he was gone into the forest.

The scent of the devil wolf was heavy on the trail. There were other wolf scents with it—the spoors of the three werebeasts who had escaped him. He ran on cushioned pads, his claws clicking on the rock, his head low. A silvery half-light clothed the forest about him, brighter than he remembered. A hundred odors poured into his moist nostrils —scent of the little food beasts of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the forest, the musty reek of a viper that had crossed the trail, the cat odor of a lynx that had taken to the trees as the chase flashed past. He glimpsed it over his shoulder, crouching on the hanging limb of a great oak, staring after him with yellow eyes.

The scent was fresh and hot and his wolf's brain filled with it. It was hateful and he lusted for the kill. Then something else began to struggle and push the wolf in him aside. He was a wolf, but he was also Tor. He was a man, and the things he hunted were men. They could think like men, and he must think like a man to outwit them.

Something cold and heavy lay in the fur on his chest. The amulet! Its magic had cast the wolf shape on him. Its magic had turned aside the werebeast that had attacked him, and driven off the rest, even the white devil wolf who led them. Would its power still protect him?

He stood sniffing the wind. The gorge was narrow here and the breezes of the night flowed through it like a whispering river. His quivering nostrils caught a scent that was not from the trail he followed. It came from behind him. They had circled around.

He crouched as the first wolf sprang. Its fangs met in the loose skin of his throat and his own canines gashed its shoulder. He pawed at it with hands that were turned to paws and rolled aside as it slashed at his unprotected flank. He gained his feet and reared back on his hind legs, tearing free; then, with blood dripping from his torn throat, he pounced on the beast that had attacked him and with one snap crushed its spine.

He stood over the slowly changing body and faced the other two. One had felt the power of the amulet when he was a man, and was wary of it. He stepped forward, stiff-legged, his head low, and suddenly they turned and slipped away into the darkness.

The man scent of the werecreature and the reek of its blood clogged his nostrils. He trotted a little way along the trail to where it crossed a rill and lay in the icy water, letting it sink into his wounds. Awkwardly he pawed at his throat. The amulet was there, but its protective power had evidently been exhausted in transforming him into a wolf.

Somewhere the white monster was hiding. It feared him. It had sent the beast men to ambush him, to pull him down if they could or to hold him until it could escape. His wolf's eyes narrowed and he rose dripping to his feet. He knew where the devil wolf would be. He knew why it needed time, and what it would try to do. And he must get there first!

THE FOREST flew past under Tor's racing feet like a carpet of black velvet. The smells and sounds of the night flowed past him unheeded. His heart pounded against his ribs and his red wolf's tongue lolled out as he bounded through brush and over tumbled boulders, straight for Fenra's cave and for the cavern of the thing whose image was his magic.

His nose told him that the priest's cave was empty, but the trail of the white wolf was fresh on its floor. His claws pattered on the stone of the passage as he trotted down its winding length. His wolf's nose led him unerringly where it forked. The white one was wasting no time in reaching its lair.

Soon his eyes caught the flicker of light. He was near the cavern.

He slowed and stole, belly-flat against the floor, to the end of the passage.

A pile of glowing embers made the only light in the vast place, but to his wolf's eyes they cast light enough to show him all there was to see. Beside them crouched the silvery white shape of the devil wolf. It had something in its mouth—a parcel of withered leaves—and as Tor slipped out of the shelter of the passage it dropped the herbs on the heap of coals. They smoldered a moment, then flared up with a cloud of white smoke—and suddenly the white wolf turned.

Face to face, the two werebeasts stared across the fire. Step by step Tor advanced, stiff-legged, placing each foot carefully. The hair rose along his spine and his lips drew back in a noiseless snarl. Then without warning the white beast sprang at him.

Tor met it in midair. His fangs ripped across the other's cheek, tearing an eye; his shoulder caught the beast's foreleg and flung it aside. He fell on his own shoulder, twisted, and was on his feet in a flash. He pounced on the werebeast as it turned, felt his jaws meet in its stringy throat and gagged on the lank hair that filled his mouth. He snapped again as its fangs raked his breast, was bowled over by the creature's rush and scrambled to his feet again to face it, panting.

Then, on the floor between them, he saw the amulet.

At the same moment he felt the change begin. His flesh crept. The darkness grew blacker, and the reek of blood and of the devil wolf faded. His muscles moved and tightened, pulling him up on his haunches. He dropped his fingers to the floor to steady himself and the wolf pelt slipped from his back, leaving him naked.

The fire was bright enough for him to see the hoary shape of the werewolf crouching, a man's length from him. Its eyes were on him. They shifted and he saw the amulet again, glowing with its own light. Man against beast now! Picking up the bloody wolf pelt he leaped at the devil beast.

The creature's fangs snapped harmlessly at the loose skin. Its claws raked at him, then before it could reach his throat his own sinewy fingers were digging into its windpipe, his legs were pushing it back, back and over, and he drove his knees into its hairy chest and felt its ribs crack under his weight. He rolled aside, one knee hooked around its belly, and caught its throat in the crook of his arm, then yanked back with all his strength. There was a snap and the wolf went limp.

Tor crouched beside the fire, the amulet in his hand, staring down into the fathomless darkness of the pit. The smoke of the priest's fire was thickening out there, though the priest's broken body lay at his feet. Fenra—priest of the great wolf—who had made himself a wolf to wreak his devilish appetite on his own people.

There was something out there in the darkness—something which Fenra's magic had called up out of the hidden places of the earth—something which had given him power, and whose image had given Tor power to become, like him, a wolf. Tor knotted the thong which held the bit of ivory and slipped the loop over his neck again. He would keep that power.

The smoke cloud formed a curtain again, between the fire and the

pit, and beyond the curtain a form was taking shape, huge and prick-eared, wolflike yet not a wolf, with slit eyes that burned through the blackness. Tor got to his feet. The less he dealt with magic of Fenra's kind the safer he would be. Lok was dead. Wod had heard Fray's story. He could return now—name himself priest in Fenra's place, or set aside the taboo as a priest might do and take his place with the other warriors of the wolf folk. They knew his power and would fear it, and Fenra would be dead. They would hunt down the beast men and there would be no more devil wolves to demand blood sacrifice.

Step by step he retreated across the cavern floor. The black mist swirled forward, over the fire, over the naked body of the old priest. It seemed that he could see, in what was now utter darkness, a huge misshapen shadow crouching at the pit's edge. Then he saw the flames again, springing high and clear, lighting the hanging sword-curtain of stone above, and the towering walls, and the wet, bare floor with its stain of black blood—the crumpled wolf pelts—the trace of burnt-out tapers—and no more. Fenra was gone!

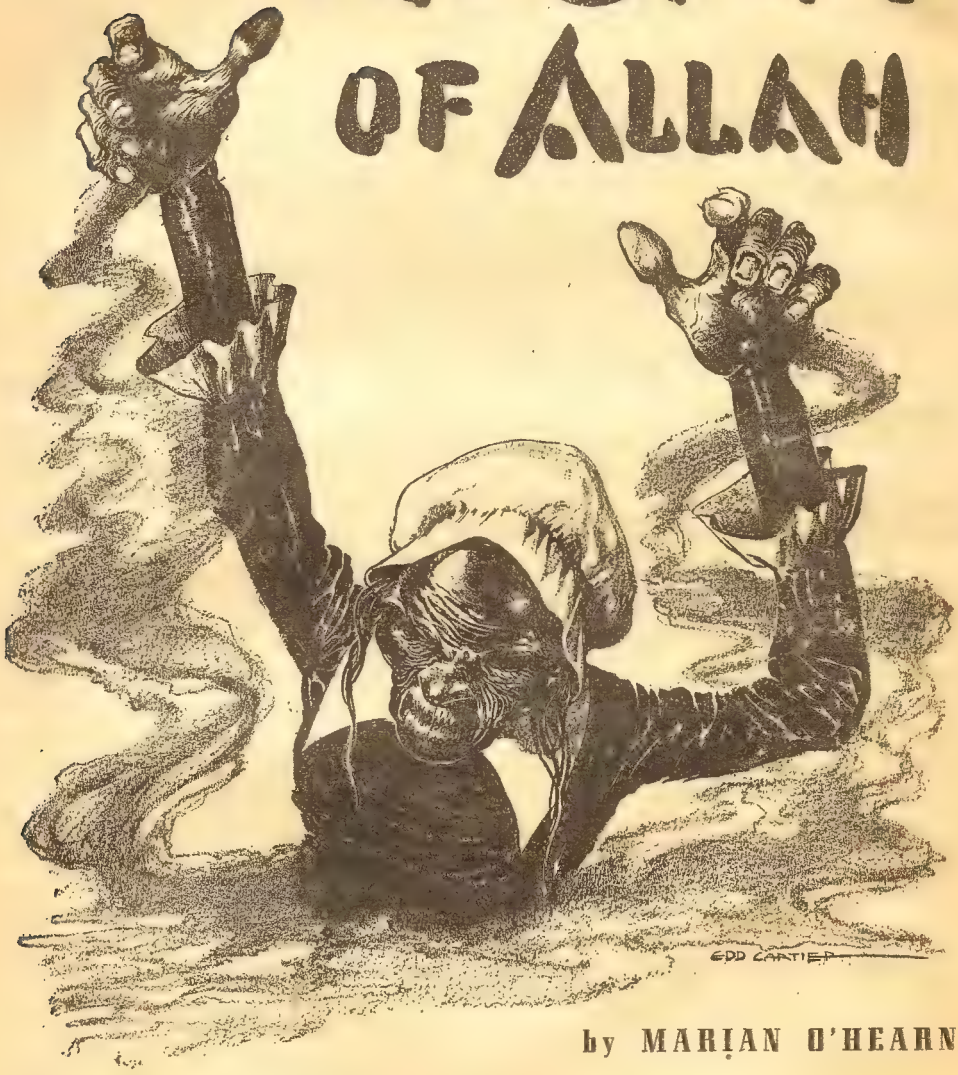
Tor stood in the mouth of the priest's cave before he went down to the people of the wolf and to Seef. He was changed. There was something in him—something unclean, shadowy, come out of the thing he had done and the black magic he had used. The wolf taint was in his blood, and his eyes narrowed, his face turned up to the full disk of the moon. His nostrils dilated and it seemed that he could again scent the many little scents of the forest.

He had been a wolf, and slain as a wolf—tasted human blood. A devil had been in him as it had been in Fenra, but he had ruled it and made his kill. Without Fenra's knowledge to hold it in the pit whence he had raised it, it might escape and ravage the clan in earnest. They must go away, eastward, to Seef's land of plains and domed skin huts and plentiful game. It might not follow there.

The mark of the man wolf was on him, yet he would take Seef for his mate as a man should and she would bear him sons and daughters, and they would mate in turn, and his seed would go down into the invisible future, bearing that taint. Perhaps the magic would thin as his line grew. Perhaps the curse would ride them until the end of men. He had broken the taboo made by first man, conqueror of the great wolf. That was not Fenra's doing, or Lok's. It was his own deed, and the curse of the great wolf was on him for it. And yet Fenra had lied when he said that the devil wolf came because of that curse. Perhaps it was all a lie. Perhaps there was no great wolf, lying bound in the black bowels of the earth, writhing and growling and shaking the mountains with his efforts to escape. Perhaps there were only things of evil, like the thing Fenra had called up out of the pit to give him power. The men he had found to the west, on the shores of the salt waters, made their prayers to the sun, to light and warmth and a power that burned away the night.

Tor shook himself. If he had sinned, he had atoned by slaying the devil wolf. That it was a were-beast made his deed the greater. And if the wolf taint was in him, perhaps the sun whose light was beginning to brighten the sky-roof above the land of Seef's people would burn it out of him, and help him shelter his tribe from further evil.

THE SPARK OF ALLAH



by MARIAN O'HEARN

● **A tale of an Immortal witch who sought a strange jewel through the terror and upheaval of the French Revolution.**

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

DEMAL saw the first of the mob pouring out of the city and his face twisted.

The strange jerking of his lips would have been a sneer except for the sick goad of his empty stomach and the mist of dizziness which hun-

ger drove across his brain. His thoughts meandered like an old and sluggish river.

He drew back, off the road, as the rushing crowd neared him and the recurring grimace distorted his features. "The great revolution," he muttered. "So this is it—an army of prostitutes and slatterns. They'll rid France of the Witch of Versailles by their curses, no doubt."

The leaders were moving purposefully, taking long, firm strides and swinging their arms, laughing back at the others as their feet slogged through mud from yesterday's rain. After them straggled the battered flowers of the Paris streets, their rouge smeared, hair disheveled and flimsy shoes already useless. Here and there were stout charwomen, carrying mops or brooms and walking companionably with the haggish sansculottes.

Close to the rear of the procession was a horse-drawn caisson with two red-faced, laughing soldiers on the seat. They shouted down to the women, and the younger ones shrieked back, demanding to ride. Finally the vehicle stopped and the women swarmed around it until several were lifted up to be soundly kissed before the horses plodded on.

Henri de Demal spat and the hunger nausea turned into brief, terrible retching. When he could breathe again he planted his feet apart so that his legs would support his weakened body and stared even more bitterly at the marchers. Women, hags, heading the revolution!

The leaders were slowing, coming to an uncertain halt and looking up at the dark, threatening sky, but a group of painted drabs hurried forward to shout encouragingly, roaring, "Onward, onward! We must not halt."

Demal's eyelids jerked apart and his wavering senses cleared with sudden, harsh shock—for the drabs were men dressed as women!

He looked sharply at the others, then, his glance cutting through the disorderly parade, to see that one out of every five was a man disguised as a street girl. Someone was making sure that the "petticoat revolutionists" would reach Versailles.

The nearest of the women were eying him, and a middle-aged harridan leered invitingly, "Come along," she snickered. "We'll put the royal strumpet in chains and eat the pheasants she ordered for dinner."

He felt himself sway under a fresh onslaught of dizziness, and the weakness was running down his spread legs, melting away the last of his strength. So they would banquet in the palace tonight! Well, maybe that was all revolution really meant. Just food. If he had some, he might be able to think through a plan for getting out of the accursed country. Some soup, now, would warm a man through and give him courage—there was no courage without it. Had anybody ever realized that spine and soul both came from the depths of a bowl rich with onions and cheese?

His mouth filled with saliva and his pinched nostrils quivered after the scent of the food his brain was picturing. He tore his tantalized thoughts from the vision and watched the lines which were moving past. Distorted, blobby faces turned grotesquely to look back at him; faces going on to Versailles, where tables were laden with delicacies for the queen and blood-red meat for Louis.

ABRUPTLY, Demal started after them, staggering against the ruts of

the road. Women laughed idiotically and joined arms with him, their raddled features screwed into simpers and their bodies exuding the stench of the streets. He hunched his chin down into the collar of his coat and plodded heavily, holding his eyes straight ahead. Growing annoyed, the women departed, racing ahead to shout back blurred insults.

Something touched his arm. A feathery touch—that turned a painful grip which made his head jerk up as he turned. And in spite of his cloudy half consciousness, he reeled backward in shock, for never had he seen any human thing such as that which was clinging to him. It was a very black, aged Negress, and she dug her stiff, hooked fingers into his flesh as she peered up with eyes which were almost lost in the wrinkled folds of ancient skin. Her mouth moved. She was toothless.

"You're about to collapse, my son."

He nodded, not speaking, wanting to shake off the dark claw and stop seeing the dried wound of a mouth which struggled to formulate each word.

"Well, hunger's done that to many lately. Only these"—with a contemptuous head jerk toward the mongrel throng—"seem to be well fed."

"They and our gracious queen," he muttered.

The black woman laughed, and her eyes brightened until they held none of the revolting age of her face. "You haven't the tongue of the rabble, which means you stayed loyal to poor Louis."

He shook his head. "I cast my lot with that of the common people—"

Her shrill cackle stopped him. "Now, that was wise for a member of the gentry! What did they do to you?"

"Confiscated my property down to the last suit of clothes. Even when it comes to food I have to wait. The 'gentry,' as you name us, can be fed only after everyone else is satisfied."

"What did you expect? You're a renegade to the revolutionists because if they were in the saddle they'd fight to stay there. Now—" She broke off, for Demal, attempting to back away from her, had reeled weakly to his knees.

"As bad as that, is it? Come." She heaved him to his feet and pulled him on, but it was only long afterward that he realized the amazing strength which had been in her emaciated hands. "If you stop, they'll walk over you and grind your body into the mud. Here"—she opened a black bag and took out part of a loaf of bread, which she pushed into his hands—"eat that and then we can talk. I'll hold you up."

Moving very close to his side, she supported him against the sudden rushes and thrusts of the crowd, urging him along with her while he tore ravenously at the coarse bread. But within a few yards she stopped, and her withered frame shook as she fought to regain her breath. "You're heavier than I thought. I can't help you on any farther—now you can go alone for a while, for a few minutes, until I return. Look at me."

He pushed a chunk of bread into his mouth and regarded her with dull eyes, for food was bringing with it not a clearing of his senses, but an agonizing weariness, a heavy need of sleep. The black crone's mouth worked, shaping words with the dry, wrinkled gash which had once been lips. "Walk on slowly—straight ahead—do not turn aside

for anyone." Her eyes were hard and clear and knowing, gleaming from the ruin of her face. "The ground ahead of you will be smooth and it will be easy to walk—until I come. Now turn and start."

Her voice had leveled off into a droning murmur. A monotonous buzzing like the sound of a great bee. Demal convulsively swallowed and masticated food in his mouth and walked on. He moved slowly, but with greater ease, for as the old Negress had said, the ground now seemed smooth, the ruts had disappeared and there was no mud under his feet. The jostling, snickering women pushed into him with teasing squeals or furious oaths, but they did not sway him from his way, and he moved ahead unwaveringly.

He had forgotten the old crone, but not the food in his hands—food which was headier than any wine he had ever tasted. And, as he came to the last scrap of the bread, he put it between his lips slowly and lingeringly, wanting its blessed taste to remain. But there was a sudden disturbance, his serenity was gone and he stumbled against the reappearing roughness of the earth. Something was pushing into him, clawing at him, hanging to his hand. He stopped, and his dulled eyes finally saw that the old woman had returned. She was talking to him, shaping words with desperate speed, as she told him: "This is my mistress, Madame Lucille Favras."

Demal saw the girl at her side, and his senses stirred sufficiently to make him try to bring his heels together and straighten his stooped shoulders. She was a tall girl, in hopeless rags, but bearing the unmistakable stamp of blood. Not thin, but sufficiently slender to give a neat turning to ankles and wrists. Her face, half concealed by a dirty, fringed shawl, was one of strange, sharp loveliness. Perhaps there was too strong a hint of chill classicism in her features, but her eyes made up for that. Ther were as green as Oriental emeralds, and the hair under the old shawl was brilliantly golden.

She smiled—a queer, slow smile—and it was as though the end of bread had been life-giving meat, for strength began to flow through his body. She said softly, "We'll help you, monsieur—my maid and I."

"Your maid might need help herself."

Her smile died, and her face might have been cut from tinted marble. "She's not so old as she looks. Now, come, monsieur."

She put her arm under his, but he smiled into the green of her eyes and drew her hand up until it was he who was supporting her. She stopped and her body stiffened. Deliberately, she looked at him, meeting his glance with brooding directness. And, as Demal realized that her eyes were actually jade-green laid over fiery gold, sight left him. He was staring at nothing, seeing nothing. He knew the girl was still before him, looking at him, and he could hear the uneven roaring of the marchers, but there was nothing except darkness before his eyes!

Had he gone blind? In the name of God—that, too? Hunger again. Vicious, scourging hunger that tore a man's body apart bit by bit! Now—

There was a groan from somewhere near. A shuddering groan which broke from his own throat, and he flung his hands up to grope for his eyes. In that half-crazed movement he released the girl's arm —jerked free of her—and as his fin-

gers touched his face, light flooded back, bringing sight with it. He saw the gloomy countryside and the human caricatures sweeping past.

"I . . . went dizzy," he mumbled. "I thought for a moment—but it's over now, madame."

"Is it? Then I'm glad," she said in her rich tones. "We'd better hurry."

His glance swept toward her, touched her face and encountered the green gaze—and once more he almost reeled to the earth as the blackness clamped over his brain.

"Come." She put her hand on his arm and urged him on. "You're still weak, but you'll be all right and tonight we'll feast."

"Wait! Wait—" But he added hastily: "Yes, of course, we'll feast." For again he was seeing clearly.

Strange that as he looked into the girl's face the world blacked out not once, but twice. He turned to her, but as his gaze rested on the line of her lips and chin he swiftly faced front.

The old black woman stepped into place on his other side, and the surge of the crowd began to work with them, carrying them along almost without effort. But Demal kept his gaze straight ahead and wondered if he had imagined seeing green eyes turn into actual flame. Had the glinting gold threaded through the jade really become terrifyingly brilliant before his vision disappeared?

"Hunger," he told himself. "Hunger does worse things than that to a man, for nothing could be worse than having the brain paint pictures of food which doesn't exist. Weakness made me dizzy."

But he did not look into the face of Lucille Favras again. Instead, he concentrated on keeping pace with the marchers before and behind him so that he and his companions would not be crushed when the mob made another reasonless spurt.

THE CRUNCHING of wheels made Demal turn uneasily, wondering why the soldiers on the caisson were coming through the crowd. But this was a second cannon mount which was just joining the obscene procession, and the man driving it was whipping his team around the marching lines. Women shrieked coquettishly or pretended they would halt his horses, and the soldier grinned with delight. His earthy laughter bellowed when the sansculottes, tiring, began to hurl insults instead of invitations, but then his glance touched the girl beside Demal and he pulled closer.

Lucille Favras' shawl had fallen, and her hair was a golden flame about her face as she regarded the man with a strange, impersonal quiet. He stopped his horses and bent down, calling: "You, there, mademoiselle—that head of yours is a fortune I'd like to win. Come up here and save your little feet."

She did not seem to hear, although the black woman rumbled ominously. But the soldier was not to be ignored, and when the girl and Demal walked on he kept the caisson abreast. "Come," he bawled hoarsely, in what he thought was a whispering tone. "Come, my pretty—just one little smile and you ride all the way to Versailles."

She stopped and dropped Demal's arm. And she seemed taller as she turned to speak. "Be quiet and go away."

He stared and began to laugh uproariously. Demal stepped past Lucille and snarled into the boyishly beefy face: "Pull off and lock your tongue or I'll give those animals your carcass to feed on."

The soldier hauled at the reins and sprang to the ground in almost the same motion. But as his stalwart body dove, Lucille Favras was, somehow, in front of Henri de Demal—between him and the soldier. He was once more weak, weaving uncertainly on buckling legs, while numbness spread over his brain. What had happened during the last second, and how had the girl gotten between them? He felt shaken, as if he had been lifted from the earth and then dropped back to it.

He braced himself, feet slogged deep into the churned mud, and his glance jerked to the girl. She was facing the soldier, staring at him—and her eyes were the color of Oriental jade pierced by threads of fire. Not just the color of fire—not just that.

Desperately, Demal rubbed a clammy hand over his face. What was she doing or saying? But she was not speaking. Just looking steadily at the soldier and lifting her hand. That was queer— Her hand was giving off a glitter, a brilliant glitter! It was coming from something on one of her fingers—from a great emerald ring which was the color of her eyes. A priceless emerald on a woman of the petticoat revolutionists!

The soldier's cheeks lost their ruddy firmness and changed outline, like putty crumpling in the sun. And his eyes—God! wouldn't he ever stop opening them? The veins of the eyeballs were a distended, swelling purple!

Demal made himself sway forward, although his feet refused to move. "Madame, leave the lout now—"

But she was speaking. And he would never forget her voice, which was like a swinging bell. "Be still," she was murmuring. "Be still—forever

"Forever," she repeated, and Demal's flesh quivered as if loosened from the bones. He was cold, as he had never been in his life, and his nerves were jangling wires jerking through that loosened flesh.

As her voice stopped the soldier began to sway, to topple forward; and then, stiffly as a felled tree, he hit the ground headfirst.

Lucille Favras turned and took Demal's arm to draw him into the crowd, saying to the old black woman, "Octavia, no more of this. Hurry."

But Demal planted his feet in the ooze and, keeping his eyes from the girl's face, drew a hard breath into his lungs; pulling violently away from her, he twisted back against the mob. That man had been unconscious when he fell, and he had struck the ground just there, near the caisson.

"Open up!" Demal shouted. "Open! A man fell—he'll be dead! Hear! Stop where you are—you'll kill him."

He plunged, recklessly, into the flow of the procession, shoving aside furiously screeching women, receiving a glancing blow from a heavy masculine fist. He swept more ragged bundles of cursing humanity from his path, only to stop as he saw the soldier lying, face down, in the mud. Feminine feet were trudging over his flattened body, pounding, stamping, grinding. Dozens of marching, thudding feet which would not stop. The soldier was dead, had been dead for minutes, and the hags laughed as they pranced over him.

Demal looked away. This thing that had happened—the girl with her eyes of emerald and fire. No, he

was sick. This was the kind of imbecility which brought madness.

"Mesmerism," he muttered, "or Cagliostro's pandering. Unless—"

The stumbling words halted on his lips. He could feel the breath which formed them turn cold as Lucille Favras' voice spoke from behind him. "I've found you at last, monsieur. I was worried that you'd be hurt. You seemed so weak a while ago, but then suddenly you were a lion, going to that poor boy's aid."

Demal turned so slowly that his face was almost calm as he confronted her. But he did not look at her eyes. Instead, he focused his gaze a little to one side of her head.

"It did no good, madame. He's dead."

"That's too bad. But many of these people will be dead before long, and if they knock us down we'll die, too. Come, monsieur—you didn't tell me your name!"

"Didn't I?" He regarded space again—space just beyond her beautiful head. "I'm Henri de Demal, madame."

"That's an excellent name, and now, if you'll give me your arm, we'll find my Octavia again. She can't be far ahead."

A howling cry cut off her words, and those around them stopped as shrilled words pierced the air. "We can go no farther. The storm—the storm!"

Even with the words came the first pelt of rain. Bitingly cold, it sent chill into the bones and made the miles ahead impossible. Lucille whirled away from Demal, to plunge into the crowd like a burrowing animal, and a moment later he heard her calling: "No, we cannot stop! The Witch of Versailles will get away and take with her what belongs to us! A little storm can't stop us! We'll sleep in the palace tonight—we'll sleep in the queen's bed!"

Her voice was a bell sending its notes clearly over the straggling, dispirited lines, and almost at once came a tremendous, answering shout: "On to the palace!"

Someone at Demal's side laughed hoarsely, deep in their throat, and he saw that it was Octavia, the old black woman. She sidled up to him and hooked an ugly, dark claw over his arm. "What do you think of all this madness, sir?"

"I don't know," he muttered. "The whole business reeks of death. It's as if her eyes meant death, too."

"What? What did you say?" Octavia swung about, her gaze stabbing from the black ruin of her face.

"Nothing except words. Hunger's making me mad. I'm seeing strange things."

"You'll see stranger—when we reach Versailles."

The women behind them broke into another sudden movement, thrusting vigorously forward and forcing them to stride on hastily. The Negress clung to him until Lucille reappeared, breaking through the swarm to join them. She took her place beside Demal, and as they walked he felt strength returning, moving through his veins until he was almost buoyant; as if he were drawing new vitality from the golden-headed woman beside him—from the woman who had stared a soldier to his death! His glance slid toward her, but when she turned he looked quickly away.

The rain began in earnest and beat fiercely against the spread-out procession of women and men disguised as women. It whipped the rouge from their faces, beat their shabby skirts into dripping lank-

ness, plastered the hair to their heads and reduced them to the dreadfulness of scarecrows. But Demal was walking even faster, his head up against the storm and, when someone swung into the first bars of the new "Marseillaise," he, too, began to sing.

"There—" Lucille called, and pointed ahead. "See the lights?

Weak and swaying with hunger, Demal watched the crazy flow of the mob of street-women bound for the storming of the Tuileries!

That's Versailles! It's dusk now and it'll be dark when we get there. Then—" She stopped and, holding his arm, faced him. In the gloom she seemed very tall, and her eyes were green as they burned into him; green over fire which loosened the flesh from his bones. "Henri de Demal, we didn't keep you from being trampled to death because of a whim, nor did we come here for the walk. In the palace of Versailles there's something we want and you'll get it for us."

"But in the palace—"

"Be quiet and listen. When the mob charges the place, go to the queen's apartment. In the sitting room, off her bedroom, is a globe of glass—a crystal. That's what we want."

"A jewel of the queen's will be well hidden."

"It's not a jewel, and even if it were, that scatterbrained creature wouldn't know. It's merely a ball of glass—on a little wooden stand—and it's placed in a cabinet of her sitting room. This crowd won't bother with a thing like that, but reach it as quickly as you can and hide it in your clothing. You'll be sure to recognize it because, the moment a human hand touches the crystal it turns blue."

"But—"

"Hush. We can be heard. Just remember what I said."

A SHOUT was rising, and the mob began to move faster, breaking into a run which forced Henri and the girl along. A handful of uniformed guards appeared, scattering across the road with leveled muskets, but they did not fire a single shot, for the marchers merely swept over them, swirled into the park of Versailles and spread out over the fabulous gardens. The rumbling roar lifted to a greater peak, and women began to kick at the velvet grass or tear viciously at the flowers without halting their race for the doors, where, massed on the steps, was a detachment of the household guard. But they, too, fled without using their guns, and the first of the revolutionists were inside the palace before a single bullet snapped. When one came, punily, from an upper window, maniacal laughter answered and the rest of the unkempt party streamed into the great entrance hall.

"To the witch's room—we'll take her bed. Tell the servants to get our supper, and wine with it! There's the way to her apartment—up the stairs."

A man appeared on the landing. A plump, thick-bodied man whose dull, tired face looked unbelieving. He lifted his arms and tried to speak, but was brushed aside by the hysterical, frothy-mouthed raiders. And, with something of horror, Henri de Demal heard his own laughter ringing above the uproar, for the man was Louis, the King of France.

Doors were splintering, and Demal wet his hot, dry lips. He wanted to get out of this. If he could find food, there might be a way to turn his back on the insane land of his birth. But he was wedged hopelessly in the very center of the human jam, kicked and jabbed and squeezed as the whole mass heaved forward.

Something touched his shoulder and held on until he looked back—into the green eyes of Lucille Favras. "Remember, the cabinet in her sitting room," she said. "I'll search the bedroom in case it's been moved."

She broke off, sank down below the level of the surrounding heads

and, wriggling between the swarming bodies, disappeared.

DEMAL was carried forward, pushed and pummeled toward vast sliding doors which had been forced apart. Those behind him, with a howl of impatience, leaped for the threshold and he was shot into a great, high-ceilinged room which was hung with tapestries emblazoned with fleur-de-lis. But he had been hurtled into a complete, strange silence. A dead, unmoving silence. And his stumbling arrival was the only sound, although the bedraggled revolutionists were trying to inch back to the door.

He pulled himself to his feet and saw what had stopped the army of hags. Backed against the opposite wall was a woman whose arrogant eyes were filled with contempt. She was beautiful and consciously regal. She was the Queen of France.

With the sansculottes stealing for the doors, he was able to breathe once more, and as he straightened he realized that Marie Antoinette was staring at him with defiant distaste. He stepped backward swiftly. What had happened here? The queen was too furiously hated to stop a bloodthirsty mob with her disdain, and what had come over the fierce street women to make them slink out of the ruler's presence?

Glittering light caught his gaze and drew it toward the queen's throat, where, suspended on a chain, was a ball of crystal bluer than the bluest sky of Italy.

The drabs, staring at it, were silent as they edged out of the room.

Lucille had told him to take a blue crystal from the cabinet in the queen's sitting room. Was it the one at her throat?

A voice spoke softly, very close to him. "Never mind looking for the crystal. There it is—the Witch of Versailles has been smart enough to wear it. She has the Spark of Allah on her."

The words spun him around to face Lucille Favras, who was taut and terrible as she stared at the queen; still more terrible when she looked at him with eyes which were shimmering green. "Do you understand? The revolution has failed. Marie Antoinette will remain Queen of France."

He forced speech past the ice in his throat, "But that ball of glass—Unless—" Suddenly his words were strong and he looked directly into Lucille's face. "It must be one of Cagliostro's crystals! Everyone knows the queen was one of his followers! Do you think that piece of glass will keep her throne?"

Lucille nodded. "Just that. But this isn't a crystal of Cagliostro's, although he gave it to her. He stole it."

The remnant of the mob which was still in the room made a sudden rush for the doors, pouring between himself and the girl and whirling them apart. When the frantic women had finally disappeared, Demal realized that only he and old, black Octavia remained in the great audience chamber.

He took the crone's arm to draw her away. "Where's Madame Lucille? She was here just a moment ago."

The ancient Negress shook her head and mouthed soundlessly before she muttered: "You're mad. Madame did not come into the palace. She's waiting for us to bring the crystal out to her."

WHEN Demal and Octavia emerged into the upper corridor of the palace, it was empty and there

was no sign of the mob except the muddy debris littering the ruined floors, but riotous noise echoing up the great stairwell told of the wild scene below.

Octavia halted, one hand on the banister. "So—it's thus that cattle behaves," she mumbled. "Well, follow me and we'll find my mistress."

She started down, bent and hobbling, but moving at surprising speed. Without glancing back, she dived into the convulsive crowd struggling about the bottom of the stairs and Demal lost sight of her. He tried to get to the main entrance, but it was blocked by solidly wedged humanity, and surrounding the wedge were eddying streams of bedraggled, utterly confused women. A few were stripping tapestries from the wall or cutting their names into costly woods, but otherwise the petticoat revolution was dissolving into a gigantic fishwives' sortie.

A huge, buxom figure pulled off a flaxen wig to disclose a man's bullet head, and called to no one in particular: "You can dawdle here if you wish, but I'm heading for the kitchens and food. They can't keep us away from that."

There was a shout of agreement, and he turned to lead the attack on the kitchens. Demal followed, and they charged through broad doors, down a corridor to another flight of steps, and emerged into the vast kitchens, where the royal servants cowered away from them. Yes, there was food here—the smell of it, at least. And finally the sight of it. Fowls and dressed sucklings, great trays of appetizers, crusty, rich bread.

Demal clubbed his way toward it and snatched greedily, frantically, while the less desperate women shrilled abusive orders at the cooks. They wanted their fowls cooked quickly—and well—mind! Where were the wine cellars? Was there no soup?

Demal stuffed bread and cheese into his pockets, gathered great handfuls of foods such as he had not tasted for long months and then looked for a way to escape, having no desire to eat his first decent meal in the company of howling vixens. It was a long trip across the cellar, but he finally reached a door which opened on a narrow stairway. Above, he emerged into a gloomy corridor which ended in another door which swung in to reveal a great, flower-bedecked table at which places had been laid for twenty. Exquisite linen and brilliant silver gleamed, candelabra glittered. And seated at the table was a single person, a slender woman whose hair flashed golden in the lights. Lucille Favras!

She said calmly, as if she had known that he would appear: "Come in, monsieur. It's quiet here."

"Ye-es."

Her hand rested on the table, and the great emerald was green fire. Her face was still, unreadable. Beautiful, but with a beauty which belonged to something past and done; something too chill for life. And not even her ragged garments were noticeable now. Indeed, she might have been Marie Antoinette presiding at her own table—

"Come in!" Her voice sharpened and heat stung into Demal's cheeks, but as her gold-threaded glance touched his he moved to the table, to put down the food he had brought.

"You came prepared."

"I've been hungry for a long time, madame. But I'm glad you're here so that we can talk. You told

Her strange green eyes caught those of the soldier—and he froze, eyes glazing—and died!

me the crystal you wanted was given to the queen by Cagliostro. But he was practically driven from France months ago."

He could feel her gaze creeping over his face. "Cagliostro is the most dangerous man in all Europe."

"Not now! He's in prison in Rome—sent there by the Inquisition."

"He *was* in prison," she agreed, "but there aren't any jails to hold him, and he's in Paris at this moment."

Demal tried to hold his gaze on her tilted, chiseled mouth, but in spite of himself his glance flicked up to the eyes which had sent a soldier to unbelievable death. "Then the crystal—"

"I've told you that." Her words were quick and impatient. "The crystal was not his to give. He stole it, trying to gain favor with the queen. Now, you'd better eat."

He pulled his glance away and looked down at the cloth under his hand. But there was nothing there —no sight of white linen or silver! Only glaring blackness pressing into his brain.

"Monsieur—you're faint! Some wine will help. Octavia!"

QUICK FOOTSTEPS pattered and a glass was put into Demal's hand, but even as his fingers grasped it he was able to see. The crone was bending over him, and he gulped the wine hastily, turning his head to avoid the sight of her working mouth. "I'm all right now," he said. "I hope enough food will stop these—spells."

"Yes, of course they will. But don't try to talk until you've eaten, please!"

Demal ate, and after a few moments almost forgot the presence of the girl as his starving body realized the gratefulness of food. Octavia poured more wine, and when he lifted the glass he kept his eyes on his plate. If he were dining with death, he could be complacent enough, but he had tasted the horror of life in darkness, and not even the woman's beauty could tempt him again.

"Finished?" she murmured.

"I think so, but I feel that I'd like to eat forever."

She laughed. "Still, you can stop for short intervals. I want to show you some of Cagliostro's work. You see, not even Marie Antoinette's friends want her to remain Queen of France, and now they know that she will—at least as long as she has the Spark of Allah."

Demal darted another look at her face. "This Spark of Allah story sounds like a fairy tale. As if a bit of glass could retain a throne!"

"I'm trying to explain." Her voice knifed coldly across his. "This is not just a bit of glass. It's the oldest crystal in the world, and not even the courtiers know it kept the mob from killing the queen."

"Well—"

"Come with me." She got to her feet, and the emerald on her finger winked like a great, green eye. Without waiting to see whether he was following, she went to a door, opened it and walked through an adjoining dining room. Demal wondered at the vast echoing of his footsteps when they struck the marble of a hall behind the chief entranceway. The girl paused and then went swiftly up an ornate, twisting stairway, moving like one utterly accustomed to the interior of the palace. A moment later Demal became confused and lost sight of her, only to see the gleam of her

golden hair as she glided back to him. "Hurry," she whispered.

He strode after her, into another, twisting corridor, where she halted before a narrow door and waved him to silence. At last, beckoning him, she opened the door and stepped over the threshold. Inside, Demal saw that, some three feet away, heavy velvet curtains were drawn across the room, and stretched from floor to ceiling. Lucille swayed close to the wall, and with infinite care lifted the edge of the heavy curtain. Demal, staring over her shoulder, saw nothing at first except thick gloom which a single, faint light intensified, but then he became aware of men and women crouched against the walls, watching the glow of the candle resting on an altar draped in black.

Everyone was motionless, and the men's faces were as white as those of the women. In fact, all that distinguished between the sexes was the flowing hair which the women wore streaming down their backs. Their fixed eyes glistened and their folded hands twitched convulsively. A small, murmuring sound was swelling, as if a swarm of bees were rising, but the humming came from the lips of the crouched figures. The chant grew and two men appeared, marching toward the candle until it threw light on the great blades of the naked swords they carried. Both were stripped to the waist and on their oil-covered torsos were strange, ragged symbols painted in crimson. They faced each other and, together, bowed low before the altar. The humming stopped and there was dead stillness until the men, speaking together, declaimed, "Althotos, we come to implore your aid. With the power you now possess beyond the veils, you can deliver us. We are the humble disciples of your Unfortunate Child of Nature, Cagliostro, and we beg at your feet."

Their words ended, and the others began to repeat what they had said, turning the sentences into rushing moans.

LUCILLE TOUCHED Demal's arm and gestured toward the door. He hurried after her, but she would not let him speak until they were back in the dining room.

"What does it mean? Who were they?"

She sat down on a gold-encrusted chair and lifted her hand to study the emerald of her ring. "They are members of the noblest families in France; courtiers, some of them favorites of the throne. All of them are devoted students of Count Cagliostro, and they were using his magic ritual to find spiritual help —with which to be freed of their king and queen."

"But they've stayed here—they're still in the palace, beside Louis and his wife! If he weren't loyal—"

"They stayed because they were afraid to go. The last nobles who tried to get out of the country were killed before they could reach the German border."

"Do they think the revolution will save them?"

"Not exactly, but they're hoping a counter movement may bring the king's cousin to the throne or found a completely new dynasty. Anything, in fact, to be rid of Marie Antoinette."

Demal, remembering the queen confronting the mob, murmured: "She's beautiful—and probably not as bad as she's painted."

"That's true, but it'll be discovered too late to help her, for since she took up Cagliostro and his magic the people have feared as well as

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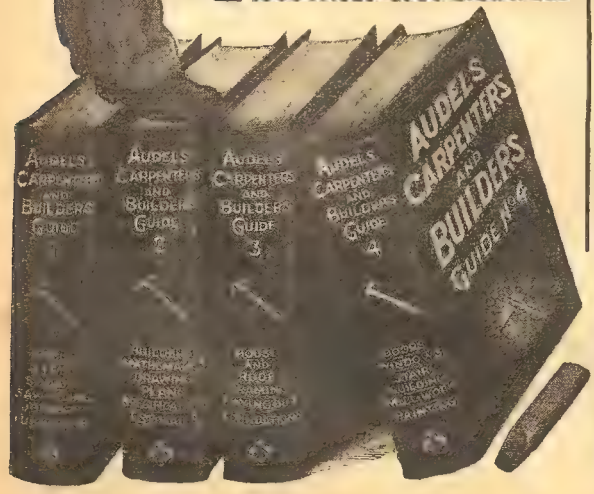
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hated her. Most of the French peasants are sure that once she's dead, famine and illness will disappear—they say she's been seen acting as a sorceress at the count's ceremonies."

He made a sound of weary disgust. "The peasants and most Parisians would believe a toad was the devil in disguise! Witches, magic, sorcery! This isn't the fourteenth century!"

"No." She glided to her feet. "But the world remains much the same, no matter how the century is named. So now there's no reason for us to stay in Versailles. Good-by, monsieur."

"But where are you going at this time of the night? If I can take you—"

She was already at the door, but turned back to smile at him. "No, thank you. Octavia is waiting for me."

"But I can't let you go alone!" Why had he said that? Why was he making pitiful gestures of courtesy toward a woman who was actually not a woman, but something which was deadly?

Her glance flicked over his face. "The lights, monsieur—"

Her voice trailed off and, as it died, the room plunged into darkness. Every wall light, every taper expired, leaving Demal in complete blackness.

"Madame—"

He leaped for the door on feet which were not steady, for once more his flesh felt as if it were being wrenched free. Something crashed into him and he snatched at it, only to realize that he was clutching a chair. He dropped it and moved on, more cautiously, but when he finally located the door he found the corridor was also completely dark. He got through it at last by keeping one hand on the wall and feeling carefully for each footstep while half expecting some crouching thing to

spring from the gloom. Abruptly he emerged into the blazing lights of the smaller reception hall, but it was empty, and there was not even the faintest echo of a footstep.

Where were the shrieking revolutionists? He started to cross the foyer, but before he had taken three steps an armed soldier blocked the way.

"How did you get in here?"

"I haven't left," Demal said, wondering what the man's air of authority was as complete as if the last few hours had never been.

"Then leave fast—if you want to go alive. We're searching every inch of this place to be sure there's not a single ugly crow left in it. Get out."

"Did the others leave—of their own will?" Why did the youth remind him of that other soldier who had died while staring into the eyes of Lucille Favras?

"Will? That pack of sniveling trollops! They'll start for Paris in the morning at gun point, just as they left the palace. If they try any more mischief, they'll find themselves facing a whole army. Now —" He moved his gun significantly.

Demal went through the great doors to the outer steps and there more guardsmen roughly helped him on his way. But a few minutes later he realized that while the household guard had regained control of the palace, the mob was still in possession of the gardens and nearby grounds, over which they were prowling restlessly. The rain had not stopped, and some of the women were cowering into shrubbery or under trees, hugging their thin clothes about their cold bodies. Demal, pulling his collar high around his throat, walked aimlessly. The handful of soldiers on the steps kept their rifles at the ready to warn off anyone trying to approach, and he noticed lights in the distant stableyard. There would be shelter in the barns! Heading swiftly toward them, he entered a lane behind the palace which, after much meandering, led to the yards. The bulk of a carriage house loomed ahead, and it was one of the few buildings showing no light, which meant that it was deserted. At the doors he halted and turned to glance carefully behind him before trying the lock, which gave instantly. Gave too quickly—for as it swung back a man confronted him with a lifted sledge hammer.

"I wondered when the she-dogs would get here!" he snarled in a basso rumble. "But male or female, you'll have a smashed skull."

Demal hesitated. The carriage house, instead of being unlighted, was bright with the glow of lanterns which sacking over the windows concealed from the outside. And in the light he could see the man in the doorway clearly. He was big, thick-thighed and heavy-shouldered, whereas Demal, almost as tall, was much slighter and more lightly boned. But intending to sleep in some degree of comfort, Demal deliberately let his muscles loosen until his legs poised his trunk. He regarded the man coolly, his aristocratic face calm as he said, "I'm no she-dog and want none of them, but I'll put civility into your tongue if I have to twist it out!"

And he leaped, crashing into the other's legs, twisting away from the hammer as they fell. The man under him grunted and brought up his great arms to form a destroying vice, but Demal had hold of the ax handle, and, clamping both hands on it, he jerked, rolling his body back. The ax twisted from the oth-

er's strained fingers and he sprang to his feet, holding it over the man's face.

"You can take your choice between giving me a bed or having me swing this."

"You're welcome to the bed." The hostler sat up and twisted his face into a grin. "Close the door or we'll have the horrors in here with us."

DEMAL SWUNG the door to, and the man scrambled warily to his feet. "The name's Pierre Roquert, friend, and I hope you're not one of the revolutionists."

"I'm not sure." Demal started for the glowing stove, carrying the hammer with him. "Right now I want to get warm."

He began to strip off his sodden clothing, feeling a weariness so savage that he was indifferent to the chance of a sudden attack from Pierre.

"The shafts of that coach'll be a good place to dry them. Here's a blanket." Pierre threw a coarse blanket toward him. "You can always remember that you dried your rags on the royal carriage."

Demal carried his garments to the gleaming state coach, and his lips stretched into a dead grin as he placed them carefully on the shafts. "That's something, although soon nothing royal will be important."

"Maybe so." Pierre hunched down on a workbench. "Maybe not. The she-wolves seem to have lost some of their courage, and they say the queen's wearing the crystal—"

"Crystal?"

"That's right. One Cagliostro gave her before he was driven out of the country. It's supposed to protect anyone touching it."

Demal laughed. "So people still don't know Cagliostro's a fraud."

Pierre shrugged. "Whatever else he is, including the devil's own, he's not a fraud. I know what happened the night he came to Versailles. The court had interested the queen in his cult, and she had him brought here. Well, pictures fell from the walls of the rooms he entered, and women forgot the faces of their own husbands. Two foals died, because no newborn thing can live within a mile of him."

"That proves it, then. Two foals died while he was here!" Demal looked around the carriage shed. "If there was a bed and I thought you wouldn't strangle me, I'd like to sleep."

"There's a cot over here, and I'll think twice about the strangling." Pierre rumbled with laughter as he led the way toward a curtained corner. "How's that?"

"It'll do." Demal dropped onto the cot, trying to remember how long it had been since he had experienced the comfort of blankets and mattress.

The hostler regarded him with a scowl and then bent over to speak. "You look as if you could use a little money, and there's some to be made around here tomorrow."

Demal opened his eyes. "How much—and doing what?"

"Listen." Pierre hissed the words. "Tomorrow morning, two hours before noon, I'm to have a large carriage ready with one or two good men to drive it—toward the border."

"Who'll be in it?"

"Who do you suppose? Do you think Louis and his wife are just going to sit here and wait for more riots? They're getting out until the country's safe. Traveling light and fast, too. If you can handle horses, you'll be paid well."

Demal sat up. "There are plenty

of drivers among the servants. Why hire someone you've never seen before?"

"You're too full of questions. Everybody knows there are few servants or courtiers the king and queen can depend on."

Demal met the eyes bent down on his own. "I could use the money. Will the queen take the crystal—the one she was wearing—with her?"

"I don't know what she'll take, but she won't leave that behind after today. So I'll count on you."

He moved away, and Demal dropped back onto the bed, but in spite of his aching exhaustion it was minutes before he dozed. He would help the royal pair to escape if for no other reason than to see, once more, the glass ball which Lucille Favras had called the Spark of Allah.

When Demal awoke, dawn was long past, but the daylight was an uncertain, dismal gray. Discovering that Pierre was not in the carriage house, he gathered his wrinkled clothes from the shafts of the royal coach and got into them hastily. But when he went outside there was no carriage waiting, and this section of the grounds seemed deserted, although a distant noise rumbled persistently; told that the mob had not yet departed.

He walked toward the sound, wondering if the regiment of women was preparing for a fresh assault on the palace but, reaching the gardens, he saw that the crowd was still resolute, huddled into drearily gossiping knots. Household guards were stationed at every entrance, and he wondered, grimly, why the women didn't just walk up to the doors and overwhelm the soldiers as they had the night before. What was holding them back? A glowing sphere of glass at the queen's throat? "Marie Antoinette will keep her throne," Lucille Favras had said. He grinned bleakly, with that furious, convulsive movement of his lips, for Louis and his wife were not counting completely on the crystal, but planning to steal away from their raging subjets.

Rounding the corner of the palace wall, a shrill child's voice halted him. "Hello." The thin words floated down. "I want to go out, too, but they won't let me."

His glance swept up and located the voice. A window only a few feet above his head was open, and from it leaned a blond, curly-headed small boy whose face he recognized at once, for everyone in the country knew the likeness of the Dauphin, the adored second son of the queen.

"They're right," Demal told the youngster. "It wouldn't be nice outside just now."

"Then why don't you come up here?"

Demal shook his head. "That wouldn't do, either."

"Why not? Look, I'll show you something. I'll give you this."

The child flung out a hand, and a hard light pierced into Demal's eyes—blue light which held a deep, strange fire. And it came from the crystal which the queen had worn the night before! The young prince was dangling the chain which held it across his chubby fingers.

Cagliostro's crystal, which had turned back the Parisian mob after it stormed into the queen's own apartment!

"Catch!" The Dauphin laughed. "See—it changes colors."

He opened his hand, letting the chain and its pendant ball drop, and Demal saw the sphere falling with all color draining out of it. When it struck the earth he reached

for it before it came to rest, and as his fingers closed around it, the blue shade washed back into its center. He held it without belief. The Spark of Allah. Lucille Favras, wearing a great emerald, had marched to Versailles to find it, and a soldier who interfered had died. On the queen, it had terrified a mob which desired her death more than anything in the world. And now—

The thud of marching feet came to Demal. Soldiers were approaching from the front of the castle. He dropped the crystal into his pocket and held it gripped in his fist as he ran across the gardens. But a staccato shriek halted him as sharply as if he had crashed head-on into a barrier. The straggling, indecisive street women were suddenly and terribly a cohesive mob, storming at him. He turned, but they were pouring from all sides, coming in waves which sprawled from nowhere to smash down upon him. Directly behind him was the palace, but there the soldiers were hastily forming ranks and swinging up their guns. A bleached hag, like something released from the grave, was in the lead, howling, "Come, citizens of France—to freedom! No more waiting like hungry curs!"

The revolutionists were ready at last to kill the queen they hated.

But he was caught in the very center of the new storm, and unless he moved fast, traveling with the rioters, he would go down— He remembered the grinding feminine feet passing over the body of the soldier. His hand clenched harder on the glass thing in his pocket, and he felt the flesh of his palm grow warm as if it were squeezing fire. Nothing to do but be taken along with the mob, which meant he would be held here when he might be on his way to the city.

Well— He set himself, resignedly, to be thrust forward into the palace, but—the pushing, jabbing women were not touching him. They were moving aside, around him, flowing past without even brushing his clothing—and were doing it as a matter of course, without being aware of their actions! The stone was burning his hand, and he relaxed his grip. Still, the rioters detoured, leaving a clear path before him, and suddenly he laughed—a gigantic roar of laughter which shook his body and refreshed him as if he had drunk old brandy. He was free to go! The frenzied women looked shrunken as they stormed past, waving their pitiful clubs and sticks. Shrunken and tiny, like little, helplessly snarling animals. He looked down at them, feeling far above them, a giant wading through pygmies, and there was strength in all of his body. A welling of power made him feel that he could easily brush them from his path!

He began to walk, his strides long and light, his head back, and his laughter in his chest lifting him on.

"Monsieur! Monsieur de Demal!"

It was a squeaking little voice. Feeble and difficult to hear. But it persisted even when he had left the beskirted army behind.

"Monsieur—you must wait."

Octavia was hobbling after him.

"Yes?" he called. "I'm in a hurry, so speak quickly."

He looked back at the palace and saw that the guards had been overwhelmed. The revolutionists were entering with sky-splitting howls. So they would go through with it—now that Marie Antoinette had lost the Spark of Allah! There was a new commotion before the great main doors and a gun exploded, causing the rioters to surge apart,

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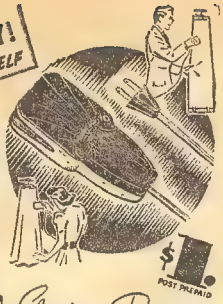

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sending out banshee screams as their feet stamped down the soldiers they had disarmed.

"Monsieur—" Octavia was almost whimpering, but he could not look at her, for his gaze was frozen to the scene at the palace doors. A soldier's pike bearing the head of a murdered guardsman was being pushed aloft, and the sight of it sent the mob into excited frenzy.

Demal finally looked down at the Negress, who had stopped three feet away and was making no move to come nearer. "I haven't seen your mistress."

"No. She's waiting for us, now that you have the Spark of Allah, sir. If you'll give it to me, she'll be overjoyed."

"How do you know I have it?"

Her dry wound of a mouth fumbled air excitedly. "We know—I know. Give it to me quickly."

He shook his head. "Even if I have it, why should I hand it over to you?"

"But you promised my mistress that—"

He shrugged. "Promises don't matter now, anywhere in France. Nothing counts, and whatever a man can grab is his. I'll keep the crystal."

"But—" The old woman's face actually turned light as the shock of his words blanched her black skin. "You can't— I tell you—" She stopped and tried to smile. "Perhaps you'd better talk to madame. I'll take you to her."

"Where is she?"

The wavering grimace widened artfully. "Never mind that, sir. She's close, so if you'll come—"

"No. Tell her that I may give her the crystal later. I'm not sure, because I want to know more about it, first. Just now it's as much mine as hers. She had no more right to steal it than I had."

He moved away, making for the

stable yard. Once he thought that a dog yapped after him, but when he turned his head he saw nothing except the old Negress.

DEMAL BEGAN to run, hearing the din from the castle only faintly, for his mind was concentrated on the carriage which would be waiting for Marie Antoinette and Louis. If they reached it—

There it was. An incredibly bulky vehicle hitched to six matched horses and resplendently gleaming as it waited before one of the smaller rear doors of the palace. Surrounding it were a handful of armed guardsmen and near them, pacing nervously, was Pierre. He looked up with a shout of welcome. "You've come! I hope to the good God that they can get here. I don't understand what's happened, for everyone knows the queen was wearing the crystal."

Demal stopped. He was not even breathing hard and his run had been no strain upon his body. He was aware of regarding Pierre from a height, although only the night before the man had seemed huge. And flowing marvelously through him was the sensation of indomitable, almost superhuman strength. He slid his hand back into his pocket and touched the Spark of Allah.

"They won't get here. The queen has lost the crystal. So I'm taking the carriage to Paris myself. Hop in, Pierre, and we'll find out what's happening in the city."

The hostler's sturdy body jerked erect and he cocked his eyes at Demal, his face readying for laughter. But as their glances met, his mouth straightened and his skin dulled to the shade of rotting leather. He backed away. "We'll wait here for the king," he muttered. "We'll wait if it means death—"

"Get in." Demal dropped his voice so that the soldiers could not hear, and his eyes held those of Pierre. Now he would know—

The hostler's body quivered, and slowly, with queer leadenness, he stepped forward.

"Tell the soldiers I brought word from the king that the carriage was to leave."

Pierre turned woodenly and delivered the message to the guard captain, who eyed them uneasily. But Demal sprang up to the driver's seat, caught the reins and waited as Pierre stepped heavily into place beside him.

He cracked the whip, and the horses started down the drive away from the palace of Versailles. As they turned onto the highroad, Demal laughed hugely. "Now, Pierre, we're going to Paris and find Cagliostro."

DEMAL KNEW that he was less than two miles from the gates of Paris when the sun made a brilliant, unnatural appearance by breaking through the clouds directly overhead. Warmth sparkled down on the gleaming carriage, pouring over him and the silent, lifeless Pierre, who sat like a thing turned to wood.

He laughed again, as a man roars a song. "See, that means we're right! The sun is with us." Leaning forward, he cracked the whip over the horses, but then immediately hauled on the reins, for ahead was a rickety ox cart, loaded with trash and hitched to a lean old horse which was led by a hobbling woman. "Hallo-o, there," he bellowed. "Get to one side—pull off the road."

The hobbling figure did not swerve or turn, and the cart continued to sway in the middle of the road. Demal let the team get directly behind the cart, and then

shouted, "Look out, there, grandmere. Pull that donkey wagon aside."

The old woman turned and, dropping the guide rope, tottered back to him. "Are you going to Paris, sir?"

"What of where I'm going? I want to pass."

"But I have to get there in a hurry. My horse can't carry even as much extra load as I make, and my grandchild is dying. Will you take me with you?"

"What about the cart? You can't leave it here."

"I'll take care of it if you'll just wait. Wait in the name of God, monsieur!"

"All right, but hurry." He watched while she darted to her cart, led the aged horse into a field and left it there before scrambling back to the carriage.

He gave her a hand, saying, "You'll be comfortable in the back."

"Yes, sir. Thank you and God bless you, monsieur."

He whipped the horses again, and the golden heat of the sun increased. This was pleasant, to ride with the wind in his face. Pleasant and relaxing. He felt tired—too tired, suddenly, to hold the reins, and they began to slip from his hands. Queer, that just a little while ago he had held the strength of the world in him. The slipping rein dragged heavily at his fingers and he aroused, struggling against a deadly faintness. What was wrong? The sense of being master of the world— It had come when he put the crystal in his pocket and clamped his fingers over it. The Spark of Allah.

Dully, heavily, as if his arm were lead, he lifted it and thrust his hand into the pocket to feel for the ball of glass. It burned against his flesh like living fire and abruptly the stupor was gone. His brain was clear and edged—and aware of danger. The greatest danger he had ever faced in his life.

"Pierre." The man turned woodenly, with his eyes still vacant. "Here." He thrust the reins at him, and twisting to look at the back seat, his eyes caught the wide, staring gaze of the old woman. There was something in her hand that glittered. But—her gaze was not the dark, weary one he remembered. He was looking into flame-shimmering green. Green—and the thing in her hand was a great emerald.

DEMAL'S MOUTH went dry, and his lips scraped against each other as he spoke. "You. Lucille Favras."

The eyes did not flicker and the constriction in his throat grew. Blindness would come now. Darkness and the hell of darkness. Her gaze had sent a man to death and had temporarily robbed himself of sight. But now his vision remained clear and sharp, although he was looking straight into the pit blaze of her eyes.

"You—" he repeated, and he wanted to laugh, to roar triumphant sound out at this poor, huddled thing who could no longer harm him.

She leaned forward, and the marks of age disappeared from her under his very gaze, leaving her young and too beautiful. "So, you really have the crystal!"

The words aroused Pierre, and he turned sharply to look at her. "What's that? The crystal—"

His face was changing into crumpling putty, his eyes swelling until the reins turned purple, and saliva trickled from his open mouth.

"Man." Demal caught his arm

and jerked him around. "Shut your eyes, fool; turn back!"

But his fingers, closing on the hostler's arm, found the flesh rigid, and as the man swayed off balance he toppled over the edge of the box seat. Demal gathered the reins, sawing the team to a stop.

"Pierre!" he shouted, but knew, even as he climbed down, that he was dead. He walked to the stiff, unnatural thing huddled on the ground and saw that the eyes were blindly regarding the sky. He scowled back at the carriage, and then bent to lift Pierre's body, which he carried to a grassy strip of ground beside the road. He put him down gently, and that was all he could do, but perhaps someone else would come along to give the poor devil proper burial.

And now he'd see to the woman, for without the crystal he would have been lying in the hostler's place. Life had been fading from him, too, until he had desperately clutched the glass ball! So the Spark of Allah was proof against whatever death power she possessed, and if she were one of Cagliostro's creatures, this might mean the crystal was greater than the sorcerer! Possibly it could even overcome the man who was supposed to have turned many human beings into living dead which knew no will or thought except that of their master!

Demal lengthened his stride toward the waiting carriage, determined to force the girl to take him to Cagliostro, but when he jerked open the door the rear seat was empty. There was no one in the coach.

He wheeled back, automatically, but only for a moment's glance, knowing that Lucille Favras' disappearance could not be solved.

He snapped the whip and the

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carriage rolled on at racing speed until the gates of the city loomed ahead. If the magician were in Paris, there had to be some means of finding him.

THE STREETS were quiet as Demal neared the heart of the town. Not a child or dog came into view until he passed a row of cheap pensions, built flush with the walk, and then a door flew open to disgorge a man who was a miniature picture of destruction. The landlady bustled after him, talking busily while the little man trotted to the street and turned east.

Demal pulled up and the landlady's eyes became excited as they traveled over the carriage. "Madame, I'm trying to remember where I met the—gentleman who just left. Maybe you know him."

"Know him?" She smiled complacently and looked after the creature whose dirty clothing huddled about him and whose face and yellow-skinned head were wrapped in a soiled kerchief. "Who doesn't know him? Or who wouldn't like to? That, my country lad, is Jean Paul Marat."

"Marat? You mean the Marat of the Commune, the terrorist who—"

She snarled up at him. "That's what his enemies call him, but you'd be wise to shut your tongue."

He looked down at her and she stumbled back. "A pardon, sir, a hundred pardons. These days make us all quarrelsome."

"They certainly do. But where would be the best place to find Marat—say, within an hour?"

"The convent of the Cordeliers. They all go there."

"All?"

"Yes. Danton, Brissot, all of them, sir."

"I see. All the terrorists make the Cordeliers their meeting place! I must remember that, and thank you, madame."

He drove on and traveled through steadily narrowing streets to a "rent stable," which took off his affluent equipage without question. Afoot, he started for the Cordeliers, an abandoned monastery which had once belonged to the Franciscans. When he approached the door there was no sign of light or activity inside, but at his knock it swung open and a man with a scarred face, folded red-haired arms over his chest, announced:

"This is no place for strangers, friend."

"Maybe not, but I'm looking for someone. I have an appointment."

"Could that be true?"—heavily. "Whom are you meeting?"

"Marat. Is he here?"

The giant swayed back. "No, but we expect him. Come in and wait."

Demal stepped into the dim passageway and followed along it to a room which had once been the monks' refectory. It was crowded with talking, gesticulating, smoking men. They sat around long tables or huddled at smaller ones, making every movement tense and every tone thunderous. Demal found an empty chair and pulled it against the wall, out of the way. And as he watched the crowd the corners of his mouth lifted, although his grin was no longer a sardonic stretching.

So here before him were the brains of all the revolutionary movements which were tearing at the heart of France. Far down the room, pounding the table as he roared, was a man whom Demal recognized at first glance—Danton. Tall, with a body built over great, angular bones, his pock-marked face was lighted by the same intensity which flared in his eyes. Tiring of his banging, he leaped up onto the table, shouting, "I tell you, Lafayette's a camel-headed fool! He never can decide what to do until it's too late to do it—"

There was a flurry about the door. Marat entered. The door guard pointed to Demal, and the little man turned toward him. His face was too big for his body, and the lower jaw thrust out into a bony point, over which his yellow skin crinkled like dirty, colored paper.

"You said you had an appointment to meet me here, stranger." His voice was little more than a hollow whisper.

Demal nodded, and his hand slid into his pocket. "I said that because I was determined to see you, monsieur. Perhaps we can talk."

Marat's eyes opened angrily, but as his gaze caught on Demal's his breath blew noisily between his lips and the saffron of his complexion deepened.

"Perhaps—" He moved slowly to a table and gestured toward a chair. "Who are you, and where do you come from?"

"That doesn't matter just yet, monsieur. I was told"—he leaned forward and lowered his voice—"that you could take me to Cagliostro."

Marat did not move. Demal could see his small body stiffening and he waited, the crystal hot against his closed palm.

"So that's it." Even Marat's murmur was hollow. "I knew as soon as you spoke. But you have to tell me what you want of Cagliostro."

Demal shook his head. "I'll tell that to him."

Marat's eyes became watchful. "Look, man, you can trust me, unles you are a fraud and know nothing! Surely you've heard of the reputation I left in England? There's no greater metaphysician in

Europe! Cagliostro himself says that!"

"Everyone has heard of you, but this is something I can't and won't explain." He got to his feet, his eyes knifing down at the little man who started up, violently, only to hesitate and drop back into his chair with a strange vacancy spreading over his face. The same dazed emptiness which had taken possession of Pierre!

"I'll get you to him, but not now. Tonight, at eleven sharp at 10 Avenue de Kleber. Wait for me there."

DEMAL NODDED and turned away, that savage exultance rising in him like a tide. His hand clamped on the warmth of the crystal, and in his fingers he held the secret of a power which could make the most terrible figures in France quail—make them do his will almost without protest! Some day he must try its effect on the roaring Danton, but just now he wanted to see what the Spark of Allah would do in the way of providing food and bed.

The guard swung the door wide, but as he started through it a voice said softly, "Monsieur—if you please!"

A slim, graceful youth hurried toward him, and, reaching his side, slipped a hand through his arm.

"Hold on." Demal pulled away, and then found himself staring into eyes of burning, surging green. Under the hat brim which had concealed the youth's face were the exquisite features of Lucille Favras.

"The devil isn't stopped by forms or appearances," Demal said.

She laughed. "You mean I'm not. No woman can get into the Cordeliers, but it's easy to find masculine clothes. Now—" Her lips curved into a smile that was like nothing he had ever seen. "Don't you think I make a handsome boy?"

"Very." His fingers pressed against the smooth surface of the crystal. "But an even more beautiful woman. And—" He broke off, remembering that he would confront her master, Cagliostro, within a few hours.

"There must be some place where we can get coffee," he said. "That'll give us a chance to talk—"

She nodded. "You want to talk about the crystal."

"No. About you. And here's where we can do it."

He opened the door of a small restaurant and they entered, finding a table well away from the door. Their coffee was quickly put before them, and he started slowly: "You were with the petticoat revolutionists, you were an old woman on the road, now you come from the Cordeliers. You are a mystery, madame."

"Aren't all women?"

He ignored that, one hand in his pocket, holding the Spark of Allah. "Two men died because you looked at them."

She shook her head, and her perfect teeth glinted as she laughed. "You're wrong. They died of their own fears, not from the touch of my eyes. Men kill themselves, monsieur."

"So Cagliostro says."

Her face did not change, and he wanted to touch her, to know if she were real, for her beauty was something too complete and too perfect to believe. She was as alluring as death—and even now, knowing that the potent crystal was in his hand, his pulses were stirring and the blood hurtling through his veins because of her nearness.

"Well, monsieur?" she demanded

when he did not speak. "Aren't you going to ask me if I followed you to the Cordeliers?"

"I know you did. Why?"

Lucille Favras did not laugh. Instead, her green eyes chilled into points. "You've no need to ask that. I want the Spark of Allah. I saved your life and helped you on your promise to get it for me. Now you're withholding it."

"Why do you want it?"

The ice points hardened. "It's mine. Only I have a right to it, and I must have it. Without it—"

"What? What will happen without it? Will Cagliostro punish you?"

Something rippled over her face. Fury and amusement and disgust. "Cagliostro!" she sneered. "Do you believe I fear that . . . that trickster?"

"Yes," he said calmly.

"Then you're mad. Listen to me." She leaned her arms on the table and bent toward him, her eyes holding his, her lips half parted over the brilliance of her teeth. "You're going to meet Cagliostro—that's why you saw Marat. Well, don't. He can tell you nothing about the crystal, nor can he do anything for you! If you go to him—"

"What?"

But her face had grown quiet again. Still. Brooding as eternal night, and her beauty wrenched at Demal's senses, sent desire reeling through his brain.

"Nothing."

"Madame Lucille, when the time comes for me to die, I hope that you'll be near. Then death will be more charming than life, but now I'm not quite ready for it."

She arose at once, no anger on her face as she accepted defeat. "You won't be ready as long as you

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have the Spark of Allah."

He got to his feet. "You said Marie Antoinette would keep her throne while she had the crystal. When I left Versailles, the mob was charging the palace, and she may be dead by now."

Lucille shook her head. "She's not dead. They lost their courage again or someone changed their mind. Instead of killing her and Louis, they're bringing them into Paris, intending to put them into the Tuilleries. The story is that they want a constitutional monarch and want him in the city. But"—she shrugged—"they're street cats enjoying themselves, and when they tire of the game they'll kill the mice. Good-by, monsieur. We'll meet again."

She crossed the restaurant and went through the door without a backward glance. Demal made no attempt to follow her, but turned to the fluttering restaurant proprietor and told him very gently: "I have no money, my friend. I'll bring it another time."

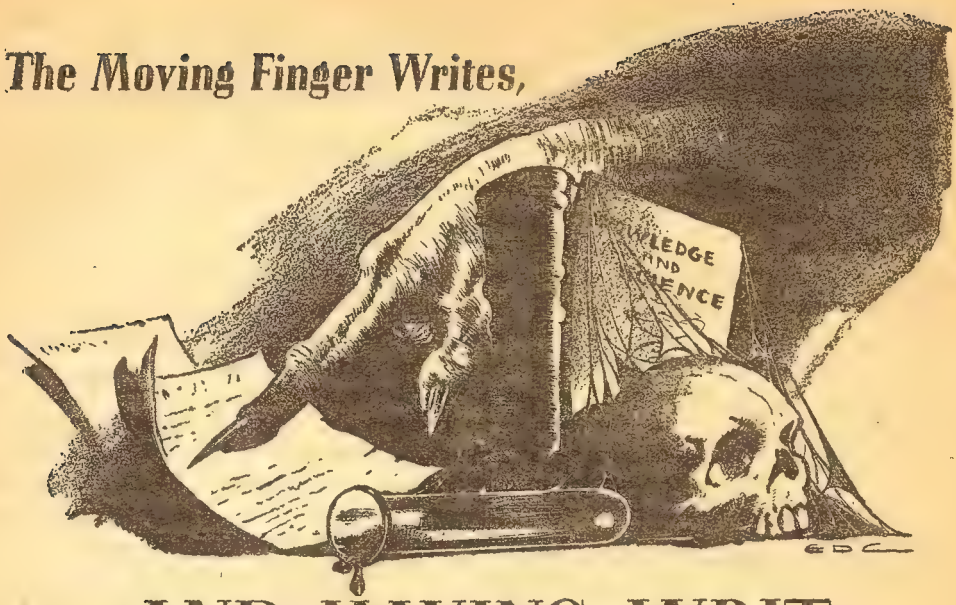
"But, in the name of the good God—" The man began to sputter wildly, but abruptly his voice broke off and he backed away. "Of course, monsieur, any time." His face was taking on the color of dirty clay.

When Demal left the restaurant he was considering where he would live. The Hotel des Rivoles was the best in town, so he would put up there and order whatever it could provide. He needed no money, now. Yesterday he had starved without it, but today it was useless, for anything in the world could be his for the asking. Anything in the world!

He stopped short and stood in the gathering dusk as the thought rang through his brain like the call of the tocsin. This was his land, his country, his world—and he could take it all!

TO BE CONTINUED.

The Moving Finger Writes,



---AND HAVING WRIT---

Ah, yes, we finished a year—

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Some time back while submitting a story I promised a letter dealing with Unknown's first year, and this is it.

Twelve issues so superb that I hesitate to pass comment on them for fear of unjustly putting a good story not in its correct position. Thus I will comment on the covers, leaving the stories until the last.

For sheer sinisterness: Your first cover by Scott. It had a quality of evil such as no cover since has portrayed. It aptly had that Unknown quality.

Second position to your cover picturing "Disaster" upon it. Incidentally this was your last cover for the year. Going to show that your splendid cover at the first was upheld to the end of the year.

Third and fourth respectively held by the "Lest Darkness Fall" cover and "Soldiers of the Black Goat."

And summing up we find two covers by Cartier and two by Scott. My hat off to both of them. They have made Unknown's covers truly impressive.

And now to the complete novels and serials, including "On the Knees of the Gods," for it had two installments in the first year.

1st: "None But Lucifer." It was thought-provoking to the extreme. After reading it, I was tempted to write you a letter inclosing a script asking for a rejection slip on the assumption that as long as the devil didn't know what I was after I wouldn't get that rejection slip. I must have lost my nerve. But I might try it yet.

2nd: "Lest Darkness Fall." Congratulations Mr. de Camp. And seeing your letter in the *Writers' Digest*, I throw my support with you. You most certainly are not a dilettante. Two in a row. That's something. Your style is very, very enjoyable. And I like your humor such as was instilled in the pages of "Lest Darkness Fall."

3rd: To "Sinister Barrier." A very satisfactory story with which to inaugurate a new magazine. But it lost first position due to the story lagging in parts. The first two did not. You were kept on your toes right until the last.

4th: "Death's Deputy." I like stories with a basis such as this. And talking about stories with a basis, my congratulations on "The Indigestible Triton." That story will be well up in your second year's list. But I digress.

Next in order came: "Soldiers of the Black Goat," "The Ghoul" and "On the Knees of the Gods." Mythology is always

welcome, but waiting three months for it takes the edge off.

Short stories: They were all good. Not a dud in twelve issues. The better ones were in order of their publication: "Who Wants Power?", "Trouble With Water," "The Changeling," "The Cloak," "Don't Go Haunting," "Nothing in the Rules," "The Misguided Halo," "Portrait," "Blue and Silver Brocade," "The Monocle," "The Psychomorph." That's it. Ye gods, I've just checked over the list and see I have left out "The Enchanted Week End." Why that was your best humorous story.

And what was the best issue? Are you asking me? It took a long time, but all around considering the cover, the novel, the short stories and poetry, I find that February, 1940, gets the award. What an issue!

And I guess I don't have to tell you who your best author is. But I'll give my support. "L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP."—Ronald Harmer, Hespeler Road, Galt, Ont., Can.

Yep, Shea's out looking for more trouble!

Dear Mr. Campbell:

A brief report of the May issue I will now attempt to put over.

M. Isip seems to have blossomed out into something more than an accomplished illustrator, for he seems to be giving serious competition to Cartier as far as cover preference is concerned. He is holding his own with that worthy at the present time, and the combination of the two every other month is very pleasing. The smooth clear style of Edd and the mysterious eddying shadow-worlds style of Isip afford interesting contrasts. Cartier's "Roaring Trumpet" pics are the best in the issue with his "Wizardry" drawings second best.

"The Roaring Trumpet," the third of De Camp's efforts with the novel, set the best with my erratic system. No doubt the more intellectual of your many readers will proclaim it inconsequential and unworthy of "None but Lucifer" and the other epics so far offered by L. Sprague. But to my young and naïve intelligence, it was interesting and not too adventurous for the more prosaic fan to assimilate, and the humor and satire were much more evident, I thought, than in "Divide and Rule" and the others. "Yngvi is a louse," "Beautiful me" and the gangster speech of the giants were delicious and the repetition only added to the fun. That gnome is the cutest thing since Dopey, but Odinn looked like The Shadow—twenty-five years from now. Of course, the novel was the best in the issue.

Williamson's serial concluded with fanfare, the Snish unveiling unexpected. This was second in the issue only because it was an installment. But maybe I appreciate this author's work too much. In all installments the pics were too jumbled and seemed out of place back with the advertisements. Keep serials some place in the middle of the magazine and put a short back with the ads. Being a rather introverted hep-cat and jive-jumperoo, "Pipes of Pan" was especially lovingly received, and nominated third best story and best short. I find Del Rey to be a constant entertainer and hope from the heart for more soon. It was most interesting to read the author's actual name, too.

Ley's article was interesting, but didn't seem complete. It should have a more meaty sequel. Speaking of sequels, "Roaring Trumpet" almost shrieks for the authors to continue the adventures of their offspring, possibly in other worlds. Long time no see, Mr. Pratt—since "Druso," "Fall of Eiffel Tower," et al. The absence of a letter department is only temporary, I hope.—Charles Hidley, New York, New York.

People don't think alike—unless made to by a dictator. So we'll go on having differences of opinion, please!

Dear Sir:

Please pass this on to Dan Anderson of Maryland who said "Soldiers of the Black Goat" was poor. If he will honestly say he didn't finish it, I will put up two bucks, you, the editor, to hold the stakes. I'm willing to bet that much cash he didn't put it down until he had read it all.

"Soldiers of the Black Goat" was one of the best and, as for writing, the best of anything you have published. I couldn't quit until I had read the last line, while on some, especially the Prester John stories, I got tired of endless repetition. No repetition about "Soldiers." It kept you on edge. Of course it didn't hit you with a billy every other line as if the writer had to keep screaming to hold your attention. There was confidence in this story, as if the author knew what she was doing and it made you believe that not only had witches

existed, but Hester Gurney was living right here and now. It let the reader look behind the scenes, into the minds of the characters.

If Anderson thinks it took up too much space, I don't. When another "Black Goat" comes along, give it the whole issue. "The Sea Thing" didn't belong in the same magazine as the "Black Goat."—William Reina.

"Fear" make Epic No. 4?

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Unknown had its third epic in the February issue. "Death's Deputy" is Hubbard's greatest story. The other epics were of course "Sinister Barrier" and "None but Lucifer." Of the short stories during the past year of Unknown, I like "Whatever" best. By all means keep up the poetry.

On the perennial question of artists: I prefer Schneeman, Cartier, Finlay, occasionally Orban. Koll also did some fine work in *Astounding* for Schachner's "City of the Corporate Mind." I don't like the Isip boys. And while on the subject of artists, you seem to be easing Wesso out of things altogether. I hope not. Scott has done some nice covers for Unknown, and of course Rogers has been something of a sensation on *Astounding's* covers. The one for "If This Goes On—" is superb.

Well, without further ado, here's "Midnight Meeting."—Charles K. Ksanda, 1616 Van Buren Street, N. W., Washington, D. C.

Now you know his wishes—figure a better answer!

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Having read *Astounding* for the past few years and also the Unknown Fantasy Fiction, I take it for granted that I can put in my little say-so. I read the first Unknown up to the present issue which contains "The Reign of Wizardry" by Jack Williamson.

I've always considered the *Astounding* the best magazine in its line until the Unknown came along—now I have to divide my praises between two of them. They both have their own individual personalities. They don't pall on one after a length of time—but are as refreshing as the day they were first published. Don't let them get in the habitual rut as many of our present-day magazines are doing, but keep them, or rather try to make the next issue better than the last was.

Your "Of Things Beyond" keeps me on your reading list—for it's there that my

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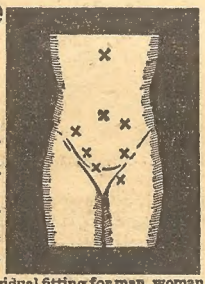

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curiosity besets me and begs me to get the next issue. Say, for instance, "He Shuttles," in the next coming issue; I'm wondering what three wishes the fellow made—as you say, he couldn't wish for all his wishes to come true—so I'm anxious to see what he did wish. Keep that department in your magazine and I promise you that it will keep me on your reading list.

Your present system of stories, such as: Serials, Novelette, Short Stories, and Readers' Department is all right. I see nothing wrong with it.

Also, extend my congratulations to your following artists: Cartier, M. Isip, Koll, Kramer and Orban. Their work is clean-cut, suggestive and well represented.

How about having one of your authors dig up a story of the Druids in and about the region of Cornwall, England. I always wondered about them. The foundries of old King Solomon is another possibility.

Lastly, your authors: L. Ron Hubbard, L. Sprague de Camp, H. L. Gold, Eric Frank Russell and Van Vogt have given me my money's worth so far. All of their articles have made lasting impressions on me so far.—Charles R. G. Rowe, 101 Claremont Avenue, Hampton, Virginia.

Even infallible editors make mistakes. Yea, verily, Isip, not Cartier, did the March cover!

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Congratulations on the swell March issue. It is one of the best in many months.

The cover was very well done, but how come Edd Cartier gets the credit for Isip's work?

Even though I don't like serials as a class, "The Reign of Wizardry" looks like it is going to ring the bell. Jack Williamson is one of my favorite authors.

Please don't let down the bars on Zombies and vampires, et cetera. We can get plenty of them in other publications if we want to read that kind of stuff. One of the reasons I like your magazine so well is its light, cheerful treatment of the supernatural.

I like the use of the slick paper in Unknown and *Astounding*. The two-color illustrations are a relief after black and white all the time. I hope you can use them in Unknown for the feature story every month.

By all means have Virgil Finlay do a few colored covers in his distinctive black-and-white style. That cover he did for *Astounding* was a letdown after the superb work he has done in black.—Frank Parker, 422 Broadway, Redwood City, Calif.

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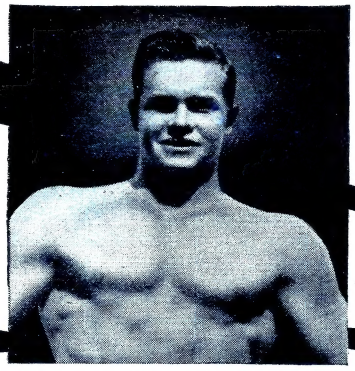

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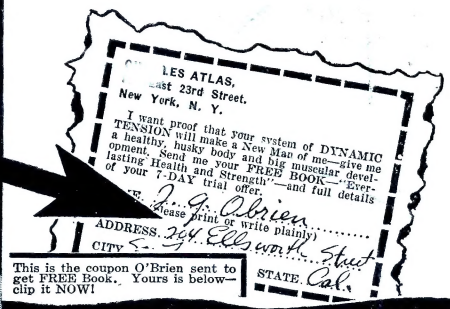

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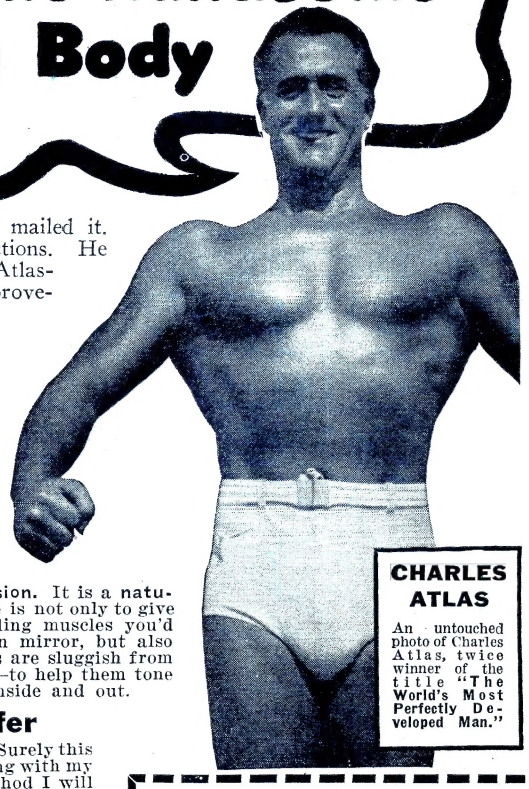

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